Kosmoikos: The search for location in a networked age
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CHAPTER 4: PROXIMITY
4.1 Introduction: Is It Local?

Consider the following routine taken from a sketch comedy program on American cable television in which a waitress attempts to answer questions posed to her by two diners concerned with the provenance of an item on the menu:

Diner 1: “I guess I have a question about the chicken, if you could just tell us a little bit more about it.”
Waitress: “The chicken is a heritage breed, woodland-raised chicken that’s been fed a diet of sheep’s milk, soy, and hazelnuts…”
Diner 2: “... and this is local?”
Waitress: “It is.”
Diner 1: “... is that USDA organic, or Oregon organic, or Portland organic?”
Waitress: “Its just all across the board organic.”
Diner 2: “... the hazelnuts? Are they local?”
Diner 1: “How big is the area where the chickens are able to roam free?” (Armisen et al. 2011, n.p.)

The waitress leaves for a moment returning with a dossier on this particular chicken for the diners to peruse before making their menu selection. Unsatisfied with the information in the dossier the two diners choose instead to visit the farm upon which the chicken was raised, where, charmed by the romantic rural lifestyle, the sketch ends with the two diners deciding to take up a new life as chicken farmers. The sketch is of course taking aim at the trend to “eat local” as promoted by food activists in the Slow Food or locavore movement (Pollan 2006, 255; Andrews 2008; Flammang 2009, 173-212) who seek to reduce people’s dependency upon and complicity with industrialized food networks.

Following Marshall McLuhan, it can be revealing to consider jokes as “grievance stories” (1995, 208). With the caveat in mind that explaining a joke tends to diminish its impact, we might consider the diners’ search for the provenance of their meal as a kind of
protest against the abstracting effects wrought by networks on the phenomenological integrity of human experience. We may indeed draw comparisons between the locavores’ search for “the local” and the previous chapter’s discussion of positionality as a response to “our inability at present to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (Jameson 1984b, 84). By radically shortening the logistical supply chain, the idea of “the local” seems to represent a protest against the unknowability of global capitalism, an ethical response to the famous Marxist slogan that “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin 2007, 256). As a guarantor of ethical action, it has however been argued that instead of opposing the cultural logic of late capitalism, the “construction of ‘the local’” may in fact be understood to reproduce an ideal of neoliberal self-management, thereby risking the de-politicization of the leftist politics supposedly at the core of such movements (Harris 2009, 55). In conflating political activism with self-care, it has furthermore been alleged that such stylized food practices constitute the recuperation and de-politicization of the vocabulary of ’60s radicalism in the service a new “boutique biopolitics” for a young urban elite (Lerner 2014, 46), a politics that is relatively disengaged with the traditional class-based holistic concerns of the left. Furthermore, as the sketch satirizes, upon arriving at the actual site of “the local,” something important appears to be missing—or to put it in fashionably ontological terms, something seems withheld from the “possibility of human access” (Harman 2005, 15).

We can think of the locavore anecdote concerning the provenance of the chicken as both a satirical comment on the increasingly politicized relationship between people and commodities—an idea that is often referred to in terms of ethical consumerism, discussed later in this chapter—but also, and perhaps more interestingly, as a rather insightful comment
on the failure of standard notions of politics to adequately reflect the subtleties of what the philosopher Bruno Latour refers to as Dingpolitik, a form of politics that “turns around questions, issues, stakes [and] things—in the sense of res publica, the public thing” (2013c, 337). Latour is known for having developed a type of metaphysics that sees everything in terms of networks, from which perspective substances appear as merely temporarily stabilized aggregates, whose parts have become so taken for granted as to disappear from being counted—a relationship which must nevertheless be continually reproduced in order to maintain this stability. With each entity or “actor” in a “network” of relations thought to perform their own ontologically distinct contexts, this approach tends to undermine the value of many predetermined explanatory frameworks. For Latour then, any appeal to context or to location, as the ultimate social explanation, is not really an option. Latour’s approach is rather to identify an actor’s particular language, imposing the least possible interpretations on those actions. According to this perspective, “the local” is better understood as the endpoint of a complex set of networked processes occurring across multiple geographic scales, than as some kind of deontological ground for ethics. In the words of Latour’s colleagues Michel Callon and John Law, together with whom he developed the field of actor-network theory: “the local is an achievement in which a place is localised by other places and accepts ‘localisation’ itself […] The local is never local. A site is a place where something happens and actions unfold because it mobilises distant actants that are both absent and present” (Callon and Law 2004, 6). By creating and maintaining connection with each other, actors are thus thought to perform multiple overlapping contexts and localities.

As this chapter will discuss, Latour provides an alternative approach to think about the search for place in a networked age and a different response to the locavores' concerns regarding the provenance of their meal. Recalling the image of the private investigator from
Chapter 1, according to this particular “informant” then, neither the concept of “the local” nor that of “the global” will be of much help in our investigation, since for Latour, “no place dominates enough to be global and no place is self-contained enough to be local” (2005b, 204). In their romantic return to a lost idyll of nature, the locavores seem to imagine the world in terms of one giant mimetic map, on which an actor’s location can literally be pinpointed—a critique that was also frequently levelled against “locative” artists (Holmes 2004; A. M. Galloway and Ward 2006; Cubitt 2007; Tarkka in Crow, Sawchuk, and Longford 2010, 131; Sack 2007, 142). As opposed to an idea of space as an empty container for social relations, Latour conceptualizes space in relational terms that do not especially privilege geography over other forms of connection—as he puts the distinction himself: “In the first tradition, if you empty the space of all entities there is something left: space. In the second, since entities engender their space (or rather their spaces) as they trudge along, if you take the entities out, nothing is left, especially space” (2009 142). Beyond merely tracking down the precise geographical coordinates of the chicken’s origins, Latour’s answer to the locavores’ concerns would be to trace all connections performed by or pertaining to the chicken wherever they may lead. Latour would in fact probably say that the locavores were not so much hungry for chicken as they were hungry for data with the humour then seeming to arise from the inappropriateness of their measurement technique (Tuters and Kera 2014, 245).

Since Latour claims that “actors incessantly engage in the most abstruse metaphysical constructions by redefining all the elements of the world,” (2005b, 51) in place of the idea that one can ever ultimately identify the exact location of anything, in the game of
Latour’s strategy could be defined in terms of what I will call non-local proximity, which leaves open the possibility that, beyond the idea of provenance, there might be something more interesting that the chicken in fact has to say for itself. This is not to say that the idea of location does not exist, or that it does not perform some kind of useful work in the world, but rather that, from Latour’s perspective, its explanatory value should not be exaggerated nor should its objective existence be taken for granted, since ultimately it can never completely be pinned down on the map. From the perspective of our detective story then, if the concept of location is of limited empirical use, our search now shifts toward investigating the concept of the network age.

27 In light of the chicken anecdote, it is amusing to note here that the title of a key text in a famous debate concerning the role of nonhumans within the field of science studies, and which Latour has called “a tiny landmark for our little field” (2005b, 75), is in fact “Epistemological Chicken” (Collins and Yearley in Pickering 1992, 301-326).
4.2 Network Metaphysics

New innovations in philosophy do not so much refute their opponents as simply cease being preoccupied by certain questions and problems (Bryant 2011, 29).

We do not start from human beings, those latecomers, nor from language, a more recent arrival still. The world of meaning and the world of being are one and the same (Latour 1993b, 129).

In contrast to the humanities tradition of critique discussed in the previous chapter, Latour sees himself as a social scientist (or perhaps even as a kind of natural scientist) committed to a systematic metaphysical inquiry into “different ways of producing truth” (2010c, 599). While delving into metaphysical philosophy is not uncommon in the humanities, it is however comparatively rare in the social sciences. In this respect however, Latour considers himself, as well as his actor-network theory colleagues, as being exceptional. The reason for this interest in metaphysics stems from the simple assertion that “[a]ctors fill the world with agencies” (Latour 2005b, 52). As already alluded to above, Latour alleges that social scientists and humanists alike often subscribe to a flawed epistemology, in which attempts at social explanations paradoxically tend in fact to reduce or overlook the questions raised by entities themselves in the ordinary course of events. Informed by his original training as an anthropologist, Latour claims by contrast to have developed an approach that is capable of registering this multiplicity by simply tracing or describing the connections that entities themselves make between each other. This approach arguably differs quite substantially from that discussed in the previous chapter, insofar as it claims to refuse any overarching theoretical framework, social explanation or grand historical meta-narrative. This is not to say that Latour considers that all established social explanations must therefore be dissolved forever into some acid bath of cultural relativism; but rather, as he puts it, to reject their “premature unification into matters of fact” (2005b, 115).
The philosopher Graham Harman characterizes Latour’s metaphysics in terms of what he calls *local occasionalism* (Harman 2009, 82), in which two actors rely on a third local mediator that provides “occasions [for] different entities to enter into contact” (Latour 1999, 141). This concept of mediation is indeed fundamental to Latour’s metaphysics, whose foremost axiom may thus be said to be that “there is no *transportation without translation*” (Latour 1996a, 119). If the theological concept of occasionalism relied on God in order to connect between two actors, in what Harman identifies as an important metaphysical “breakthrough,” Latour replaces God with “a democratic metaphysics of actors […] each serving as a mediator or translator that leaves no message untransformed” (Harman 2009, 77).

Whereas the idea of substance, the thing-in-itself as the bearer of properties, is one of the most fundamental concepts in metaphysics, Latour’s approach could be said to be based on the idea of the *thing-as-gathering*, a concept he developed in relation to the metaphor of the “black box” (Latour 1987, 3), borrowed from cybernetics (see: Hilgers 2011). Based on his own early anthropological studies regarding the production of scientific knowledge, Latour initially developed this approach in order to describe the process by which networks become stabilized and rendered invisible, so that “each stage is matter for what follows and form for what precedes it” (1999, 74). Together with Steve Woolgar, Latour studied experimental scientists in the laboratory as anthropologists would study other cultures in the field, characterizing their reliance on specific experimental apparatuses, and their use of academic citations as processes of building networks of association between humans and non-humans, arguing that science was best understood in terms of a process, constantly in the making, and always open to new data—as opposed to the old concept of scientific
“discovery” (Latour and Woolgar 1979). This work became foundational in the sociology of scientific knowledge, and more specifically helped to establish the approach that came to be known as actor-network theory. In developing a career for himself in the sociology of science, Latour sought subsequently however to distinguish his own approach from that of some of his colleagues, in arguing that the field of sociology had been hamstrung, since its inception, by the methodologically misguided problem of whether to treat the individual or the aggregate as the fundamental unit of analysis (a critique to which I will return shortly), in favour of studying the thing-as-gathering in all its local contingent complexity.

For Latour then, the metaphor of the network can be said to represent a performative dimension in the makeup of the world in which elements can always be redistributed. Latour's network metaphysics may thus be thought to advance a performative understanding of matter, that Harman notes “cuts against the grain of common sense, which affirms a world of unchanging physical solids occasionally shoved around by transient human whim” (2009, 81), but which nevertheless places him in an established metaphysical tradition extending from Lucretius (Greenblatt 2011) to contemporary debates in the humanities around “new materialisms” (Coole and Frost 2010). Latour rejects metaphysical philosophies that posit matter as “a foolproof appeal to a type of agency and a set of entities and forces that allowed analysts to explain, dismiss, or see through other types of agencies” (2007c, 138), an approach which appeals to an antiquarian idea of irreducible substance that he refers to as “idealized materialism” (ibid, 139).28 In light of this critique of idealized materialism, Latour

28 In a commentary on Latour’s metaphysics, Harman describes this idealized materialism as the “default commonsense philosophy of our time” (2009, 108), and one he dismisses as “deeply unphilosophical” (ibid, 110). But while Harman means to defend philosophy against philistinism, insofar as substance dualism may be thought of as the product of Western philosophy, perhaps the tradition of idealized materialism might alternatively be dismissed as deeply philosophical.
might claim that the locavores in the aforementioned anecdote are labouring under the naturalist view of the world as ultimately reducible to material elements—as symbolized by Samuel Johnson striking his foot against a rock in objection to Bishop George Berkeley’s theory of empiricism, while announcing “I refute it thus” (Patey 1986, 139). Against the idealized materialist’s appeal to cold hard facts, Latour simply points out that “[a]ccurate facts are hard to come by, and the harder they are, the more they entail some costly equipment, a longer set of mediations, more delicate proofs” (2005c, 11). This ultimately means that no foundational ontological distinctions can be made between the world of matter and the world of ideas, between nature and culture, between fact and fiction, leading Latour to claim that “[t]hose who look for foundations are reductionist by definition and proud of it” (1993a, 188), for which reason he characterizes his own approach as irreductionist.

In contrast to idealized materialism then, Latour’s metaphysics conceives of actor-networks as “composed of particular places, aligned by a series of branchings that cross other places and require other branchings in order to spread” (1993b, 117), their shape being determined by the strength of connections or what I am calling their non-local proximity to other actors—a concept to which I will return momentarily. Latour conceptually conjoins materialism and semiotics in order to create a kind of applied metaphysics for social scientists, whose task then simply becomes one of empirically re-describing the local complexity of the material world—though he is quick to add that such an approach inevitably leads away from “the local” as such. In tracing the ways that objects are composed, the social

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29 In order to demonstrate the dangerous political consequences of a fetishistic belief in matters of fact Latour offers the infamous example of the speech given at the United Nations general assembly by former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell in the run-up to the US’s second war in Iraq, in which Powell used a PowerPoint presentation with blurry aerial photographs and computer generated imagery that he claimed presented indisputable evidence of Saddam Hussein’s WMD program (2005c, 4).
scientist reveals the complex entanglements in which people and things are intermingled. In spite of its philosophical ramifications, in practice actor-network theory is quite modest—though it should be noted that Latour’s own project, particularly his more recent work (2013c), should not be too closely identified with the former—seeking only to describe actions without necessarily imposing social explanations or attributing discernible intentions, thereby leading away from a disciplinarily bounded object of study, not to mention a bounded concept of space, into unexpected and trans-disciplinary configurations.
4.3 Proximity to Things

*When we look into the ambiguous essence of technology, we behold the constellation, the stellar source of the mystery [...] We look into the danger and see the growth of the saving power (Heidegger 1977, 33).*

One of the simplest illustrations of how Latour’s approach blurs the distinction between objects and people comes from a well-known thought experiment of Latour’s concerning a weighted hotel key (1991). In this scenario, the hotel manager wants guests to return the key, the intention of which Latour refers to as the *program*. Crucially however, the force of the manager’s statement are assumed not to be enough to counteract the tendency for guests to forget to return the key, the latter of which Latour refers to as the *antiprogram*. In order to address this problem, the manager chooses to attach a weight to the hotel key in the hope that the guests’ actions will be more likely to correspond to his intention. While one would conventionally think of this weight as a purely physical matter—set apart from the emotional or financial matter of the manager’s own attachment to the hotel keys—for Latour such distinctions are at best irrelevant. Latour’s approach here is to be indifferent regarding the proportions of humans or non-humans in a given assemblage, a principle that he refers to as *symmetry*. Instead, he is concerned with how given assemblages form and perish in a constant struggle between program and antiprogram. Latour thus frequently conceives of the composition of material reality in semiotic terms as the articulation and translation of *propositions*—where “[p]ropositions do not have the fixed boundaries of objects” (1999, 143), which licenses him to cross the boundary between human and nonhuman, thereby overcoming what he considers to be the fallacious dualism lurking at the core of the modernist epistemology. Against the common sense notion that agency is an exclusive purview of humans, Latour sees actions as distributed across heterogeneous networks,
arguing that place-based interactions should be seen as the endpoint as opposed to the source of action. For Latour, “[t]he choice of a figuration is a bad predictor of which theory of action will be invoked. What counts is not the type of figures but the range of mediators one is able to deploy” (2005b, 58). Latour thus seeks to focus attention away from humans as the source of “primordial autochthony” (ibid, 196) towards an account of humans interacting with their tools to form networks, which in turn allow for actions to travel. As such, the “actor” in an actor-network is “not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it” (ibid, 46). Accordingly, if a given action does not have a medium, then as Latour puts it: “it won’t move an inch, it will leave no trace” (ibid, 53).

This problematization of the distinction between human and nonhuman can be understood in relation to what Steve Woolgar has called the ontological turn in the sociology of science, which seeks to emphasize “the local, contingent, particular and specific” relations between interconnecting entities (Woolgar et al. 2008). In the estimation of the actor-network theorist John Law, Latour and Woolgar’s work has been quintessential in helping to dispel the common sense notions that “external reality comes before us, that it precedes us” that it “has or, is composed of, a set of definite forms or relations” and “that the world is shared, common, the same everywhere” (Law 2004, 24-25, emphasis original). This turn towards ontology can be traced back within continental philosophy to Heidegger’s attempt to replace the disinterested status of the knower—especially the systematic epistemology of science—with the idea of Being situated in a particular location in time and space—the latter of which he referred to as Dasein. For Heidegger, knowledge was only one relation amongst many that Dasein may take up with things in the world. In spite of claiming Heidegger’s Being and Time (1962) to be the single greatest work of twentieth century philosophy (Harman 2007, 14), Graham Harman argues that Heidegger’s ontology remains restricted to human-world
correlationism—illustrated for example by Heidegger’s claim that “[w]hen Dasein does not exist […] even entities within-the-world can neither be discovered nor lie hidden” (1962, 255)—an anthropocentric flaw that Harman seeks to overcome by appealing to Latour’s network metaphysics. Out of this amalgam, Harman interprets the ontological consequences of Heidegger’s discussion of the role of tools and mediation in practice—from the opening sections of Heidegger’s Being and Time, which, it has been claimed, had previously been taken up only “half-heartedly” by pragmatists (Morton 2013, 23), notably within the field of human computer interaction design (Dourish 2004, 99-126)—as implying the existence of a world of withdrawn or withheld entities that never directly interact with one another, and which occupy a flat ontology universe where humans and nonhumans bear no essential differences (Harman 2009, 207).

This idea of flat ontology evokes a proliferation of actor-network assemblages in which one is never faced with merely dead objects or inert environments that frame our actions, but instead by processes of being in performance. This in turn implies a different way of thinking about location and positionality, from which perspective, as Harman argues, “[d]istance and nearness are not objective physical terms, but refer to how close or far we are from the essence of things” (2007, 135). Indeed Heidegger had rejected the concept of space as a container within which objects are located, stating: “a three dimensional multiplicity of possible positions which gets filled up with Things present-at-hand is never proximally given” (1962, 136). Where the locavores imagined “the local” a means by which to ground an ethics, Heidegger may be understood to have developed the idea of proximity (Heidegger 1993, 152) or “a true nearness to things” (Heidegger 1969, 131). While Heidegger defended the philosophical status of things against a Kantian legacy of anthropocentrism (Heidegger 2012, 5-22), he also developed a substantivist critique of “the essence of modern technology”
(Heidegger 1977, 22), which he considered to be ambiguous, on the one hand encouraging a
dangerous instrumentality while on the other representing a promise of stewardship.\footnote{Latour, it should be noted, sees his own engagement with the objects of techno-
science, as being somewhat at odds with “Heidegger and his followers” whom he claims
“loved to hate […] science, technology, commerce, industry and popular culture” (2005c,
22), arguing that Heidegger’s fetishization of the handmade jug—instead of, for example, an
“industrially made can of Coke” (2004a, 233)—shows that “Heidegger was not a very good
anthropologist of science and technology” (2004a, 235).}

Drawing on a selective combination of Latour and Heidegger, Harman’s object-oriented
metaphysics can be understood to undermine common sense understandings of scale through
which we tend to organize reality, leading him to conclude that “a mosquito is just as real as
Napoleon, and plastic in a garbage dump is no less an actant than a nuclear warhead” (2009,
34)—and others to draw bizarre comparisons between things at vastly different scales, for
example, “from atoms to alpacas, bits to blinis” (Bogost 2010), referred to as “Latour
litanies” (Bogost 2012, 38). Developing the consequences of this line of thought on the
concept of place, another contemporary voice in this discussion, Timothy Morton, argues that
“locality is always a false immediacy” (2013, 48), an artefact of the error of modern
epistemology that he traces back to the unthinking adoption by seventeenth century
experimental science of the thirteenth century theological concept of the infinite void (ibid,
43). Instead of “negating the specificity of things, evaporating them into the abstract mist of
the general or the larger or the less local,” Morton thus proposes the concept of nonlocality as
an acknowledgment of the quantum field theory principle that “the general itself is
compromised by the particular” (ibid, 54).

Since for Latour “[m]ost of the difficulties we have in understanding science and
technology proceed from our belief that space and time exist independently” (1987 p.228),
the idea of non-local proximity thus provides an alternative approach to the search for place
in a networked age, though in a different manner from the concept of global positionality as discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas Jameson’s Marxist metaphysics envisioned the latter in terms of “the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated” (1988, 353), Latour’s network metaphysics would accept neither the individual nor the totality as analytic categories or autochthonous entities, seeing them instead as the product of processes. If Jameson’s approach may be said to conceptualize space as a series of Russian Matryoshka dolls in which “the local” is enclosed within “the global,” Latour by contrast characterizes his approach in terms of attachment, where “the global” is attached and “the local” is not (Latour 2005b, 180). Since “networks have no inside, only radiating connectors” (Latour 2011b, n.p.), Latour furthermore considers this approach to, in fact, dissolve the very micro–macro distinction that he claims to have “plagued social theory from its inception” (Latour 1996b, 376). Similarly, John Law considers the scalar view of space as a by-product of a particular type of scientific epistemology that he contrasts to non-modern knowledge systems, from which perspective he claims that “[t]here is no global, no empty space, against which to measure and within which to locate the local” (Law 2004, 131). If the objective of Jameson’s project may be understood in quasi-gnostic terms—where the soul seeks to “disentangle itself through knowledge of its true life and its condition of alienness in this world” (Voegelin 2000, 256)—then this alternative approach may, by contrast, be characterized in terms of an entanglement with the world of objects in all their multiplicity.
4.4 Post-Critical Digital Positivism

Not only does no concept of context-in-general exist, but every use of “context” without exception is itself essentially indexical (Garfinkel 1967, 11).

When sociologists of the social pronounce the words “society,” “power,” “structure,” and “context,” they often jump straight ahead to connect vast arrays of life and history, to mobilize gigantic forces, to detect dramatic patterns emerging out of confusing interactions, to see everywhere in the cases at hand yet more examples of well-known types, to reveal behind the scenes some dark powers pulling the strings (Latour 2005b, 22).

Since, for Latour, as for Heidegger, the social world is not a collection of objects outside of us, but rather a medium that we inhabit—“the social does not designate a thing among other things, like a black sheep among other white sheep, but a type of connection between things that are not themselves social” (Latour 2005b, 5)—he considers the interpretive purchase of much social theory as limited at best. Without much hyperbole it can thus be said that one of the outcomes of Latour’s approach is to render problematic the very idea of critical distance, with Latour rejecting any explanations that imagine “some hidden actor at work […] behind the scene [as] conspiracy theory, not social theory” (2005b, 53). In place of global explanations, he advocates for an approach that is sensitive to the world itself in all its contingency and heterogeneity, from which perspective, as one commentator notes, “social scientists (or humanists for that matter) [a]re not seen as competent to judge other people’s actions on the basis of knowledge of a social structure the actors themselves would not necessarily acknowledge” (Asdal 2012, 384). As such, Latour seeks to challenge the explanatory categories of the social sciences—as well as the macro-micro distinctions upon which the separation of its disciplines are based—as being reductionist, arguing that “the presence of the social has to be demonstrated each time anew; it can never be simply postulated” (2005b, 53). Drawing on the insights of ethnomethodology, a sociological
perspective concerned with how social relations are performed locally at the level of everyday activities (Garfinkel 1967, 35-75), Latour emphasizes the primacy of practice, claiming that seemingly global entities should be understood as reliant on the performance of innumerable local actors in order to sustain their existence (and vice versa), an assertion which leads him to make the provocative claim that:

Like God, capitalism does not exist. There are no equivalents; these have to be made, and they are expensive, do not lead far, and do not last for very long. We can, at best, make extended networks. Capitalism is still marginal even today. Soon people will realize that it is universal only in the imagination of its enemies and advocates (1993a, 173).

It has been remarked that Latour advocates a sort of “new division of labour for professionals [...] in which each is expected to make an equal if distinct contribution” (Martin 2010, 89), with the social scientist’s proper role being “to make sure that the multiplicity of voices [...] is heard” (Latour in Barron 2003, 93), but “not to put some order into the world” (ibid, 81, emphasis mine). According to this view, it is only through the social scientist’s tracing of networks that one arrives at a picture of reality in all its local complexity—which in turn provides the basis for politicians and moralists to proceed with their work. For Latour, any appeal to a pre-existing context, whether it be capitalism, or the concept of the Whole Earth for example (2013a, 75-97), is simply not up to the task of representing the stakes of truly intractable issues. For these reasons then, Latour is critical of many of the central concepts in social theory, such as the idea of ‘power’, stating that:

To raise a political question often means to reveal a state of affairs whose presence was hitherto hidden. But then you risk falling into the same trap of providing social explanations [...] You use the same old repertoire of already-gathered social ties to ‘explain’ the new associations. Although you seem to speak about politics you don’t speak politically [...] You yourself partake in the expansion of power not the re-
composition of its content […] “Be sober with power.” In other words, abstain as much as possible from using the notion of power (2005c, 29).

Furthermore, Latour argues that “[m]oney per se is certainly not the universal standard looked for by Marx and other economists,” suggesting instead the centrality of standardized calculative practices, or what he refers to as inscription devices, as the basic unit of analysis (1986, 45). From Latour’s perspective, relations between entities can be understood as being mediated through standardized types of devices, leading him to describe his approach as “the summing up of interactions through various kinds of devices, inscriptions, forms and formulae, into a very local, very practical, very tiny locus […] without imposing on them an a priori definition of their world-building capacities” (Law and Hassard 1999, 17, 20).

Identifying social science with natural science through the claim that quantification is “after all, the foundation of all sciences,” Latour sees the work of the social theorist as “try[ing] to find all the available types of quantum” (Latour and Lépinay 2009, 19)—an axiom that brings to mind the nineteenth century positivism of the Scottish physicist William Thompson, often referred to as Lord Kelvin, according to whom “when you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind” (Thompson 2005, 1093). In seeking to quantify and trace everything from the micro to macro scales, Latour presents his approach as a resumption of the project of the nineteenth century French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, who believed that the difference between natural and social science was merely reducible to “a difference in capture and not in nature between the objects called material and the subjects of society” (Latour and Lépinay 2009, 28).

Envisioning an approach to sociology that might “grasp as closely as possible the genesis of inventions and the laws of imitation” (Tarde quoted in Latour and Lépinay 2009, 35), Latour
interprets Tarde as licensing a kind of disciplinary trespassing that ignores the distinction between the symbolic and material worlds, which helps to explain how, in his lay writing, he can appear to frame the infiltration of networked media into every scale of reality as a relatively propitious development—since it helps to reveal that “[t]he ancient divide between the social on the one hand and the psychological on the other was largely an artifact of an asymmetry between the traceability of various types of carriers”, a distinction he claims is erased by the range of traces left behind when, for example, shopping online (Latour 2007a, n.p.). If he were in fact alive today, Latour suggests: “[i]t is easy to imagine how interested [Tarde] would have been in the current era, in which we see growing numbers of new ways of ‘obtaining data’ in the form of audience ratings, polls, marketing surveys, shows like American Idol, competitions, rankings, auctions, spying, clicks on the mouse” (Latour and Lépinay 2009, 16). According to Latour, all this mediation provides vehicles by which to trace Tarde’s theory of imitation across scales and disciplines—indeed, as the process of social research is today beginning to shift towards the information industries (Marres 2012c), Latour’s approach has been adapted by some social researchers as a method by which to “diagnose cultural change and societal conditions using the Internet” (Rogers 2009, 8).

Thanks, in part, to the infiltration of technological networks everywhere, from this perspective, everything can thus be understood in terms of the network metaphysics in which it was always already participating.

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31 Latour’s speculation here has the feel of a genetic fallacy in how he imagines transposing the past into the present without necessarily acknowledging the changed context.
32 While Fredric Jameson had sought to critique what he diagnosed as a shift in postmodern culture away from “the depth model”—for example, contrasting Van Gogh’s painting of peasant shoes, read by Heidegger as an iconic representation of a kind of proximity to the truth to metaphysical being (Heidegger 1993, 145), with an Andy Warhol screen print of shoes as symptomatic of reification—Latour has been interpreted as licensing the view that “surface is the new depth” (Manovich 2012, 461), since “[f]or the first time, we can follow imagination, opinions, ideas, and feelings of hundreds of millions of people […] and follow their trajectories in physical space. And we don’t need to ask their permission to do this” (ibid, 472).
4.5 Learning to be Affected

Reality has many hues [...] and entirely depends on the number of elements tied to the claim (Latour 1987, 105).

Either knowledge is truly beyond us [...] or else there is access—by a new method, a new instrument, a new calculus (Latour 2013c, 84).

Since innovations in the experimental apparatus provide new data, Latour makes the positivist claim that they necessitate new types of social theory, so that “[i]f you change this datascape, you have to change the social theory” (2011a, 802), or “[c]hange the instruments, and you will change the entire social theory” (2010a, 155).34 Illustrative of this claim is his suggestion, in a co-authored 2010 text, that from the perspective of a new datascape, it is possible to look upon the entire postmodern hyperspace problematic—in which “[t]he territory no longer precedes the map” (Baudrillard 1994, 1)—as “an artifact [...] of a wrong philosophy applied to the cartographic enterprise” (November, Camacho-Hübner, and Latour 2010, 585), “a by-product of the imagination” (ibid, 595) generated by “a powerful set of intellectual technologies” (ibid, 591). Latour’s extremely bold claim here is that mapping technologies of the past were in fact responsible for creating the illusion of an “‘outside material’ world” (ibid, 591), an illusion that is only retroactively revealed from the perspective opened up by a new datascape. According to his argument, contemporary digital mapping technologies herald the possibility of an entirely new conception of space and of location, which “bears almost no resemblance with what was called ‘territory’ before” (ibid,

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34 Although the Weberian epistemology that Boltanski identifies with the project of critique (Boltanski 2013, 3) was formulated in opposition to the positivist assertion that society could be studied through the same empirical methods as the natural world, it should be noted that positivism was initially developed in an attempt at demarcating science from the influence of Christian metaphysics (Fuller and Collier 2003, 3).
585), under the conditions of translation established by a prior regime of cartographic inscription devices. Having much earlier in his career developed an analysis of the way that mapping technologies had historically been used as a technology of domination (Latour 1986, 32), in this text, Latour argues that these new devices signify a shift from the notion of mapping as “a phenomenon of correspondence between two different worlds that would mysteriously ‘resemble’ one another” (2010, 591) towards a conception of mapping as a process of renegotiation between multiple agents and the material world, in order “to help navigators find their way through their trajectories” (ibid, 593). As such, Latour seems to envision digital mapping devices as assistants to a media-centric form of epistemology, or post-epistemology, combining the concept of distributed cognition developed within contemporary cognitive science (Hutchins 1995, 49-116) and the concept of radical empiricism as developed within American pragmatist philosophy (James 1912, 39-91)—the latter considered by certain philosophers and commentators of American culture to have developed a contingent theory of knowledge a century before postmodernism (Rorty 2009).

While Latour notoriously rejects the periodization premise of postmodernism (Latour 1993b, 46), his approach may nevertheless be compared to that of Jameson, as discussed in the previous chapter, in that it develops a remedy to a cultural diagnosis whose objective is to minimize the gap between an outmoded epistemology and a metaphysical situation of increasing complexity. Insofar as their intellectual projects engage with the idea of mapping, Jameson’s and Latour’s approach have been respectively referred to in terms of a cartography of unveiling and a cartography of attaching (Mitew 2008, n.p.), in which the former envisions mapping as a technique through which to cut away all relationships of dominance in order to expose the underlying space of late capitalism, while the latter conceives of mapping more in terms of tools for amplifying one’s sensitivity to issues
immanent to the environment, without necessarily prescribing what they may be or how it is that they should be framed. In contrast to the anti-realist stance embraced by postmodern philosophy, Latour has thus been associated with a new philosophical school of so-called speculative realism (Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011, 2), from which perspective, as Graham Harman notes “things are not real by being less connected with others, but become more real the more they are linked with allies” (2009, 79).

Whereas Jameson’s diagnosis proceeds from a political economic critique, Latour by contrast asks how maps might be able to address a core concern of sociologists of science, namely the assessment and representation of risk associated with technological and scientific invention. It is in fact through contemplating the problem of navigating risk in the built environment with new kinds of digital mapping technologies, that Latour concludes that there is “nothing especially spatial about cartography” (November, Camacho-Hübner, and Latour 2010, 593). Here, he critiques the entrenched distinctions between physical and human geography as another instance of what he sees as modernity’s constant drive towards bifurcation and purification endlessly repeated in how we divide the world so as to ignore the essential hybridity of things (Latour 1993b, 10-12). Suggesting that “the mapping impulse is infinitely more […] variegated than topography” (November, Camacho-Hübner, and Latour 2010, 594), Latour envisions the emergence of a topological mapping aesthetic by which to represent the risks associated with objects in the environment, what he refers to as a “risk cartography” (ibid, 587). Returning to the opening anecdote, such a mapping aesthetic would not only allow the locavores to trace the provenance of their chicken, but moreover to map fluctuating levels of risks in the environment.
Similar to Jameson’s evocation of cognitive mapping as “an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions” (1984b, 80), Latour can be understood to invoke the metaphor of mapping in the spirit of a kind of epistemological or phenomenological renewal. Having earlier positioned Latour’s thought in relation to Heidegger’s critique of epistemology, Latour’s project can also however be understood to bear a somewhat problematic relationship with phenomenology, the latter of which he criticizes for its “excessive stress [on] the human sources of agency” (2005b, 61). By focusing exclusively on the human subject at the expense of an account of agency as distributed across networks of human and nonhuman actors, Latour claims that phenomenology “will never be able to escape from the narrow focus of human intentionality,” thereby only serving to reinforce modernity’s epistemological divide between “a world of science left entirely to itself, entirely cold, absolutely inhuman; and a rich lived world of intentional stances entirely limited to humans, absolutely divorced from what things are in and of themselves” (1999, 9). While the notion of positionality, which I identified with Jameson in the previous chapter, was arguably premised on reclaiming a strong subject position from which to cognitively map, for his part Latour rejects a model in which “there is a body, meaning a subject; there is a world, meaning objects; and there is an intermediary, meaning language that establishes connections between the world and the subject” (2004c, 208) as simply the mirror image of an idealized materialism which posits a world of pure essences that only science can access. Latour’s media-centric post-epistemology can thus be understood to highlight the role of inscription devices in a kind of progressive acquisition of physical body as “an interface that becomes more and more describable when it learns to be affected by many more elements” (2004c, 206), so that more mediation increases as opposed to diminishes the reality of the world.
In this sense, his position can be contrasted with Guy Debord’s lament that “[a]ll that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (Debord 1995, 12). Thus, if the project of critique, as represented by Debord, sought to problematize representation and minimize mediation, Latour wants just the opposite, claiming that “[t]he more instruments proliferate, the more the arrangement is artificial, the more capable we become of registering worlds” (2004d, 85). As an illustration of this idea, Latour discusses the use by professional perfumers of an odour kit, a so-called “perfume organ,” through which they are taught to be “affected, that is effected by the influence of the chemicals which, before the session, bombarded their nostrils to no avail” (2004c, 207). Although he does not write much on the topic of food, another example of what Latour refers to as “learning to be affected” (Latour ibid, 206) could be found in the “taste workshops” organized by the Slow Food movement (Andrews 2008, 117), in which participants are exposed to heritage foods in order to awaken senses which it is claimed have become desensitized through constant exposure to flavourless industrial food commodities, an idea of political attunement through an appeal to olfaction, as opposed to through communicative reason.

The British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once remarked that “[c]ivilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them” (Whitehead 2011, 62). To this, Latour might add that the technologies through which we act also “oblige us to oblige them” (Latour and Venn 2002, 258, emphasis original), subtly mediating our actions until we begin “to wish something quite else from what we at first desired” (ibid 2002, 252). Since physical objects can be designed to afford a certain type of behaviour, as in the earlier example of the weighted hotel key, an entire literature within the sociology of science is dedicated to the normative capacity of design to forge moral bonds between people and desired actions, so that technological objects can be
analyzed in terms of roles in certain political scenarios or “scripts” (Akrich in Bijker and Law 1992, 208). It has, however, been argued that within this literature the dominant approach to studying the moral and political valences of technologies has tended to focus on the production of human subjectivity at the expense of attending to “how objects, devices, settings and materials […] acquire explicit political capacities, capacities that are themselves the object of public struggle and contestation” (Marres and Lezaun 2011, 489).

In an attempt to address this discrepancy, the sociologist of science Noortje Marres has, for example, developed the concept of augmented objects—that she identifies with a range of innovations in address technologies “from the labelling of consumer products to the spatial tracing of waste with the aid of GPS technologies” (Marres 2012a, 232)—as an alternative to the political analysis of objects as being embedded within broader “scripts,” in order to suggest how they might also be possessed of the capacity to influence people’s behaviour on their own terms, in a sense making objects into political actors in their own rights. While it is somewhat strange to speak of epistemology when discussing nonhumans, as opposed to an anthropocentric concept, Latour’s post-epistemology may be understood as media-centric, in his argument that “it is as if the more filters there were the clearer the gaze” (Latour 1999, 137, emphasis original). From this perspective, the more we augment and mediate the world and our experience of it, the realer it becomes, provided that those mediations are well—as opposed to poorly—articulated. If, as we have seen, location has relatively little significance from within Latour’s metaphysics, it is through his idea of learning to be affected that we can understand the normative aim of his political philosophy, which turns around the idea of representing objects as gatherings of issues.
4.6 Dingpolitik & Ethical Traceability

I now stood reading the label. It was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand [...] stirred inside their packaging, lending it a certain aura—the majesty and murderous stupidity of that organization of time and space and fuel and labor becoming visible in the commodity itself [...] what normally felt like the only possible world became one among many, its meaning everywhere up for grabs (Lerner 2014, 19).

‘Things’ are controversial assemblages of entangled issues, and not simply objects sitting apart from our political passions. The entanglements of things and politics engage activists, artists, politicians, and intellectuals. To assemble this parliament, rhetoric is not enough and nor is eloquence; it requires the use of all the technologies—especially information technology—and the possibility for the arts to re-present anew what are the common stakes (Latour 2005a, n.p.).

Recalling the locavore anecdote with which I opened the chapter; when the diners are informed about the provenance of their chicken, they immediately ask about the origins of the chicken feed. As ridiculous as this line of questioning may seem, perhaps we can interpret its intent in Latourian terms as a satirical attempt “to detect how many participants are gathered in a thing” (Latour 2004a, 246). From this perspective, we might then interpret the locavores’ frustrated attempts to get to the bottom of location in terms of an effort to transform a mute object into a voluble gathering—as an anchor to a kind of politics centred on things. In advocating an idea of a politics that “turns around questions, issues, stakes [and] things” (Latour 2013c, 337) as a remedy to the “emancipatory tasks that blinded [critique] to the interest of the object” (Latour in Gane 2004, 82), what has remained most characteristic in Latour’s political thought over the course of his entire career, as Graham Harman notes, is “the unusually significant role he grants to objects or things” (2014, 163)—though, as we will also see in the next chapter, Harman finds this to be particularly pronounced in Latour’s mature political philosophy (ibid, 83). In a move to systematize this insight, starting in the mid ’00s, Latour turned towards debates from within the tradition of American pragmatist philosophy that sought to rethink the foundations of democratic political theory in relation to
technologically sophisticated societies, where he claimed to have pinpointed “a Copernican Revolution of radical proportions: to finally make publics turn around topics that generate a public around them instead of trying to define politics in the absence of any issue” (2007b, 815). This development in Latour’s thought, towards understanding politics as particularly centered on issues, was inspired by a debate between the American political philosophers John Dewey and Walter Lippmann—brought to light by Latour’s former student Noortje Marres—in which Lippmann proposed to replace the expectation that democratic citizens should necessarily be informed of every single issue (as part of a monolithic public), with the idea that clusters of discrete publics were in a constant process of forming and dissolving around particular issues, often centred on and embodied by specific material objects (Lippmann 2011; Harman 2014, 161-178).

Latour’s politics of things, or Dingpolitik as he refers to it (2005c, 14-43), can be understood in terms of a tradition in Western culture dating as far back as the tenth century Þingvellir or “parliament plains,” where Icelandic chieftains gathered in a natural amphitheater in order to elect leaders, argue cases and settle disputes, signifying the idea that “the Ding or Thing has for many centuries meant the issue that brings people together because it divides them” (ibid, 23). In formulating this political theory, Latour’s objective is to attempt to invent a form representation (political, scientific and aesthetic), through which all forms of agency—that he claims to have been silenced by modernism (1993b, 10-12)—might be gathered together to form a type of political assembly in which scientific debate would be incorporated into the sphere of deliberative democracy. Whereas the liberal tradition of thought is critiqued for its tendency to replace politics with governance (Foucault 2008), Latour considers objects as capable of revitalizing the democratic process due precisely to their ungovernability, so long as they are well (as opposed to poorly) articulated.
In *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Weibel and Latour 2005) an exhibition at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe in 2005, co-curated together with Peter Weibel, Latour envisioned a politics based on the problematizing of things (the Greek word for thing being *pragma*), drawing on a pragmatist ideal that envisions publics as emergent by-products of self-critical communities of inquiry, which organize themselves around various socio-technical entanglements (Dewey 1954, 3-36). The exhibition could be understood to have had the normative aim of demonstrating how, in a networked age, material things can ground politics. By using information technologies in order to represent things in terms of issues, a number of the projects in the exhibition can thus be seen as illustrating the idea of non-local proximity as an alternative methodology to the locavores’ hunt for origins.35

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With the further diffusion of ICTs, mainly mobile Internet and RFID tagging and their integration in an internet of things [... t]he economic strength of the ethical economy might force capitalism to become ethical in new and radical ways. Indeed, such an influence of the ethical economy on the logic of capital might be as important as that exercised by the labor movement on industrial capital in the early decades of the past century. It might very well spur a global “new deal,” organized around social responsibility and environmental sustainability (Arvidsson 2008, 336).

Over the course of the ’00s, the ideal of *ethical consumerism* has grown in prominence (Clark 2007, 17-66), particularly in the U.K., as demonstrated in the adoption by

35 As an illustration of Latour’s Dingpolitik and as an illustration of his claim that new technologies call for the development of new social and political theories, one particular work featured in the exhibition was the *MILK Project* (Polak et al. 2005), that portrayed the provenance of a Dutch cheese from a cow in Latvia via a German transport company, for which the artists created a data visualization of the object’s GPS track-log, presenting the work as a meditation on the idea of landscape and of location in a networked age (Tuters and Varnelis 2006, 362).
major supermarket chains of various carbon labelling schema (Featherstone 2007, xviii), as well as by the international popularity of the Fairtrade label, which guarantees a minimum price for producers, as well as monitoring product quality, environmental sustainability and continuous progress in labour conditions (Singer and Mason 2006, 157). It is particularly in the area of food production that certification schemata as well as a variety of innovations in information technologies have been developed, in response to what has been called “the horrors of the slaughterhouse, the miseries of the onion fields, and the absurdities contained in a can of soda or a bag of chips” (Paumgarten 2010). As signified by the tremendous popularity of a number of bestselling books on the topic of food politics in the ’00s (Schlosser 2001; Pollan 2006; Foer 2010), from the perspective of Latour’s Dingpolitik, it might be observed that publics seem increasingly to focus on questions raised by their food. In relation to this phenomenon, the term of ethical traceability has been used to describe efforts at “keeping track of the ethical aspects of food production practices and the conditions under which the food is produced [via] capturing and mapping values and processes in the food production chain” (Coff et al. 2008, 15:9). While such transparency is frequently mandated on the industrial side of the logistical supply chain, consistent with the growing interest in the provenance of food, efforts are also being made to ethically trace and map industrial logistical supply chain networks from a consumer perspective—as, for example, can be seen in PIG 05049 (Meindertsma, Rosmalen, and Lewis 2007), a design project that sets out to represent all the products derived from a single pig after its being shipped throughout the world, from chewing gum to ammunition.

In an account that both fascinated and terrified G.W.F. Hegel and in turn Karl Marx, Adam Smith had famously described how the division of labour in a late eighteenth century pin factory contributed at once to the deskilling of labourers as well as to the increased
interdependence of society in general (Buck-Morss 2009, 5). Updating Smith’s narrative to reflect mid-twentieth century neoliberal economic theories concerning markets as decentralized and self-organizing systems (Hayek 2012, 77-91), Leonard Read, the founder of one of the first free market advocacy think tanks in the United States, wrote an essay entitled “I, Pencil” (1958)—which has since attained a kind of mythical status amongst advocates of the free market (Ridley 2011, 28). Read argued that since it was impossible for any one person to name all the antecedent component parts that go into making a single pencil, this was proof that that invisible hand of the market should be left alone to do its work. In a counterargument related to the aforementioned concept of ethical traceability, it has however been alleged that “with enough informational power, the ‘invisible hand of the market’ becomes visible” (Sterling 2005, 23), thereby potentially undermining a fundamental tenet of liberal economic theory.

As opposed, then, to the aforementioned neoliberal orthodoxy, which decried planning as being incapable of representing systemic complexities in markets (Hayek 2006, 45-58), following Latour it could conceivably be argued that economic theories should adapt to reflect changes in measurement techniques, such as those that seem to help ethical consumers navigate an environment characterized by fluctuating levels of risk by “mak[ing] transparent the full extent of food production [through] granular tracing that aims to follow livestock from conception (that is, recording both parents and over time the lineage of all animals and how they were reared) to the consumer’s home (through farms, slaughterhouses, logistics chains, and supermarkets)” (Kitchin and Dodge 2011, 229). We might then consider the development of web-based and context aware mobile applications that assign ethical ratings to individual products as operationalization of Latour’s concept of risk cartography. One such initiative, for example, applies a process referred to as a product ontology, using a
thousand indicators to analyze the makeup of a quarter million consumer objects in order to allow consumers “to define ‘what matters’ when assessing the health, environmental or social performance of a product or company” (GoodGuide 2014, n.p.), and to do so on their mobile devices as they move, for example, through the physical space of a grocery store or shopping mall. A noted science journalist has speculated enthusiastically on the potential socio-political impact of this particular ethical traceability schema, in terms of making “each of us an agent for small, gradual changes that, when multiplied by millions, will ripple through the industrial enterprise” (Goleman 2009, 174). To those in the political tradition of public sphere theory who do not, however, consider the market to be a legitimate venue for political discourse, such visions of ethical consumerism are often seen as little more than an ineffective salve for a guilty liberal conscience (Coff et al. 2008, 15:207), and “a weak proxy for real political action” (Vaidhyanathan 2012, 43).

While consumers make the ultimate decisions about what to buy and what not to buy, Michel Callon, who together with Latour has been one of the leading proponents of actor-network theory, writes about how they are “helped by a host of ‘assistants’” (2008, 35) as he puts it, from labelling schemata to data on the composition and origins of products, so that “the ability to calculate is therefore distributed among (human and nonhuman) assisting entities” (ibid, 36). Instead of rejecting this milieu as being somehow illegitimate for real political action, Callon focuses on how the environments within which consumers make their choices are designed, in order to suggest that they could also be designed differently. Callon aims to critique how these technologies are complicit in what he considers the fantasy of a “common anthropological base” (ibid, 42), by producing a model of subjectivity that he
refers to as *homo economicus 2.0* (ibid, 31).\(^{36}\) In what seems a response to Foucault’s characterization of the normative aim of neoliberalism as being the creation of an enterprise society as opposed to a supermarket society— “not a society subject to the commodity-effect, but a society subject to the dynamic of competition” (Foucault 2008, 147)—Callon argues that it is not that people are themselves adopting a competitive mindset, but rather that their environments are designed in such a way as to afford this type of behaviour, a concept that he refers to as an interactive diagram or agencement claiming:

> through the extension of network economies it is not individualism that is spreading but interactive agencements which multiply [...] to produce a society which seems to be inhabited by active and enterprising individuals but which, in reality, consists of a multitude of closely connected interactive socio-technical agencements (2008, 41).

In what can be read in terms of a response to Callon’s argument that “the network economy tends to mobilize the interactive diagram on a massive scale” (2008, 39), the computer scientist Paul Dourish (2010) has speculated on alternative models for interaction designers, which would supposedly avoid reproducing neoliberal subjectivity by focusing on the idea of representing objects as disputative gatherings of issues, such that they might form the basis for communities of inquiry. While there has been an increasing tendency amongst interaction designers in recent years to design ethical traceability interfaces through which to reflect on the impact of individual actions (Blevis 2007; DiSalvo, Sengers, and Bynjarsdottir 2010), Dourish envisions the design of a kind of anti-social social media platform that could, for example, inform its user that “the action you are about to take aligns you with X but against Y” (2010, 7, emphasis mine). While a branch of the Coca-Cola corporation in fact

\[^{36}\text{Callon’s observations reiterate a point, made in Chapter 3 by Wendy Chun, who considers that “[o]ur interactions with software [represent] a way to navigate our neoliberal world—that we believe should be transferable elsewhere” (Chun 2011, 92).}\]
offers an online service through which consumers can trace the carbon footprint of their products (Coca-Cola 2010), Dourish’s idea can be understood as foregrounding the agonistic dimension of Dingpolitik, which, as we will see in the subsequent chapter, liberal political philosophy has generally been unwilling to acknowledge.
4.7 Conclusion: The Antinomy of Location

Irrespective of political and intellectual differences, theorists have posited maps and networks—however defined—as key to empowering agents by making visible the invisible (Chun 2014, 21).

If this chapter, and indeed this thesis as a whole, began by conceptualizing the search for location as a topographical problematic—resolved, for example, by tracing the geographic provenance of a chicken—both Jameson and Latour may be understood to redefine the problematic in topological terms; but it is arguably only Latour who works out its full metaphysical consequences. For Latour, context is not a location but a condition of possibility for a new network to appear, or as he puts it, “context is what actors constantly do” (2005b, 186). We have thus seen how Latour rejects the concept of a discrete location or context in favour of tracing how an actor performs its own reality; its own network metaphysics. In the case of the locavore anecdote, we can imagine how such an approach would inevitably lead away from the parochialism of “the local” by treating the question of geographic provenance as merely one amongst many types of consideration relevant to a pragmatist “object-centred theory of normativity” (Marres 2012a, 231), where the relative strength of connection between a given actor and their issues, or “matters of concern” (Latour 2004a, 232), take precedence.

Since the emergence of locative media, the notion of location-awareness has acquired an increasingly finer granularity, moving from the global scale of GPS satellites, to the hyper local scale of objects, in what has been referred to as the “double articulation of locative media, a logic of finding and being found” (Elmer 2010, 20). As networked technologies make it increasingly possible for the mundane objects that populate our surroundings to leave
traces, and location awareness becomes increasingly standardized into mobile devices, a more relational notion of location thus seems to emerge that I have referred to as non-local proximity. As address technologies, from RFID to GPS, extend the reach of communications networks from the hyper-local to the scale of the globe without regard for distinctions between humans and things—it is, for example, claimed that “there are at least two additional things connected to the Internet for every human being’s personal device” (Townsend 2013, 3)—we can imagine how a locative-type of interface might alter fundamental concepts of location and agency, towards an understanding of humans interacting with environments to form networks through which actions can travel. Given these innovations, it seems that the locavores’ obsession with determining the exact provenance of their food and every quanta of carbon that goes into its production might be better served by mapping fluctuating levels of risk than by the concept of “the local.” If the Latourian solution to the locavores’ dilemma is that they are hungry for data, then we might say that the Jamesonian solution, by contrast, is that they are hungry for meaning. Perhaps then, the crucial difference between Latour’s risk mapping and Jameson cognitive mapping may be understood as having to do with the role of narrative. While Jameson develops his notion of cognitive mapping in relation to a universal meta-narrative, Latour rejects the general in order to focus on the particular. Where the concept of global positionality (associated with the former) is concerned with providing a perspective onto a global topology, the idea of non-local proximity (associated with the latter) seeks to trace and register the complexity of objects in terms of their own unique manifolds.

For Jameson, drawing on Guy Debord, increased mediation leads to disenchantment, which he seeks to counteract through positioning the individual in relation to the “totality of class relations” (Jameson 1988, 353), an emancipatory project which debates in new media
have identified with “aesthetics of critical and dissident cartography,” including locative media (Holmes 2009, 52). While Latour also envisions digital mapping in terms that can be understood as a remedy to the search for location in a networked age, he considers, however, that the critical tradition’s ideal of emancipation has paradoxically blinded social theory to “the interest of the object” (Latour in Gane 2004, 82). Whereas the former approach tends to treat mediation with suspicion if not outright hostility, the latter by contrast conceptualizes an entire metaphysics and political philosophy based on the idea that mediation “can stabilize social relations” (Latour 1994, 803). As opposed to leading us away from an idealized stable state of nature towards a disenchanted society, in this view mediation tends to stabilize social relations by grounding them in durable nonhuman entities. But whereas the former approach posits a type of mapping based on the concept of absolute positionality as a remedy to the perceived loss of place, the latter offers a much more modest and relativistic type of mapping based on the notion of proximity. Where the former seeks to position a universal individual in relation to a singular political meta-narrative, the latter imagines proliferating agencies in relation to a multitude of “issue-networks” (Marres and Rogers 2005, 922-933).

Prohibited from appealing to social explanations—perceived of as a “counter-productive way to interrupt the movement of associations instead of resuming it” (Latour 2005b, 8)—Latourian social theory sets itself the task of designing new instruments through which to describe the relative proximity of a multiplicity of heterogeneous realities, and perhaps, as we will see in the subsequent chapter, to speculate on their arrangement; but it remains a question as to whether this approach alone leaves much ground upon which for individuals to position themselves, and in so doing to make sense of the big picture. For the locavores, getting to the bottom of location did not ultimately address their concerns, but neither might an exhaustive list of every ingredient rated on an ethical scorecard. Although
proximity, understood in terms fidelity to the interest of the object, sets out to avoid the potential pitfalls of the global perspective of positionality—conceptualized as “a new systemic cultural norm [of] radical cultural politics” (Jameson 1984b, 57)—it also rejects, on methodological grounds, the Lukácsian epistemological standpoint from which perspective totality could be grasped. Deprived of an all-encompassing narrative framework by which to make sense of things, such an approach may thus leave the proverbial locavores unable to transcend their own parochial interests. As such, the idea of non-local proximity might arguably create a new set of problems for the locavores, in which their niche politics either become so subtle as to be practically invisible to anyone but themselves, or else they become so specific as to completely isolate them from others, as captured in the image of a potluck dinner party “where the guests have so many dietary restrictions, that everyone can only eat what they brought” (Fong et al. 2013, 19). How, then, to balance a politics grounded in the representation of difference with Lukács’s ethical challenge, presented in Chapter 3, concerning the individual’s ethical obligation to “fate of the world” (Lukács 1972, 8)? To address this question requires looking at the dialectical relationship of the local and the global, its history in relation to the environmental movement, and how these ideas may help inform a new way of thinking about location appropriate to the challenges of the current period of global environmental crisis.