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Turning Around Politics:

A Note on Gerard de Vries' Paper

Bruno Latour

In his thorough and important paper, Gerard de Vries (2007) has offered to redirect the attention of the STS community towards politics. He asks that STS extend to politics what it is so proud of having done for the sciences: namely, going out and studying its practical course instead of 'playing the philosopher' and telling everybody what science should be about. To do so, de Vries, a philosopher, establishes several useful contrasts. The first is a contrast between a political theory that turns around the *subjects* of politics (whom he amusingly calls 'mini-kings') and one that turns around its *objects*. The second is a contrast between the official machinery of government and the multiple sites where political action might be seeping through without being recognized as such by political scientists. He calls this phenomenon 'subpolitics' (borrowing the term from Ulrich Beck). De Vries' third contrast is between two ways of doing STS: one that takes political philosophy 'off the shelf' and another that studies the complex and entangled practices of politics as well as of the sciences symmetrically. (Not being a classicist, I will leave aside several other oppositions going back to Aristotle, such as the one between *praxis* and *poeisis*, which strikes me as an anachronism or, at best, a distraction from his main topic.)

The paper weaves together three threads: a nice case study of a typical STS imbroglio – the maternal blood screening example; a potted history of political philosophy; and finally, a critique of the many STS scholars who have ostensibly failed to address the issue – or worse who have, like myself, 'closes off the quest for the object of politics' (de Vries, 2007: 805). Since this is not the place to defend my *Politics of Nature* (Latour, 2004), I will instead restrict myself to exploring what I find particularly commendable in de Vries' argument.

I will make three points: (1) I will argue that the contribution of the STS field has been the reformulation of the question of politics as *cosmopolitics*; (2) I will discuss how this discovery could be made more fruitful by embracing the pragmatist rather than the Aristotelian tradition – providing, that is, that the notion of *issue* is brought to the fore; and (3) I will address how the different meanings of the adjective 'political' could be redescribed

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as successive *moments* in the trajectory of an issue by using the example that de Vries has presented.

From Social Construction to Cosmopolitics

De Vries' general critique against most of science studies is certainly correct: we were so busy renewing some of the features of scientific practice that we took off the shelf whatever political theory we had. The result is that politics was expanded to the point of becoming coextensive to contemporary societies insofar as these include fragments of science and pieces of technology. Since by now 'everything is political', the adjective 'political' suffers the same fate as the adjective 'social': in being extending everywhere, they have both become meaningless.

De Vries is also right to recognize a certain imbalance in our critical spirit. We have submitted epistemology to relentless criticisms (even though philosophers of science remain gleefully ignorant of our work!), while political theory has been treated with much more respect. As Sheila Jasanoff has been arguing all along (Jasanoff & Martello, 2004), it's about time that political practice received the same attention that we have devoted to science and its laboratories. The tropism towards 'social explanation' probably accounts for part of this imbalance: in the 'knowledge slash power' composite, 'knowledge' triggered much more suspicion than 'power', which (we wrongly thought) had been scrutinized enough.

To be fair to our own enterprise, we should not forget the double criticism that was levelled against science studies early on. On the one hand, we were accused of polluting the pure realm of knowledge by showing plays of power at work even in the remote recesses of the laboratories; on the other hand, we were accused by more politically minded social reformers of having 'depoliticized' the domain of 'concerned scientists' because we seemed to forget the weight of 'real domination'. The critique made by Langdon Winner, for instance, was that, far from expanding the leverage of citizens, science studies had largely withdrawn from political struggles all the sources of normative judgment and energy. The black box had been opened, yes, but it was found to be empty (Winner, 1993); and although the Society for Social Studies of Science gives a J.D. Bernal prize, Bernal's own ideals for the popular control of science and technology were said to have been largely forgotten. STS scholars, Winner argued, were screening out the fly of fact construction while letting the camel of political domination pass through.

This is where, in my view, de Vries' call is most interesting: those who thought that science had to remain unpolluted by politics *as well as* those who were searching for political relevance, expected to find in the science studies literature the *traditional characters* that were supposed to occupy the political stage – citizens, assemblies of 'mini-kings', ideologies, deliberations, votes, elections; the traditional *sites* of political events – street demonstrations, parliaments, executive rooms, command and control headquarters; and the traditional *passions* we spontaneously associate with the political: indignation,

anger, back room deals, violence, and so on. What they found instead were white-coated technicians, corporate room chief executive officers, mathematicians scribbling at the blackboard, patent lawyers, surveyors, innovators, entrepreneurs and experts of all sorts, all of whom were carrying out their activities in sites totally unrelated to the loci of political action and through means that were absolutely different from the maintenance or the subversion of law and order. A vaccine, an incandescent lamp, an equation, a pollution standard, a building, a blood screening procedure: those were the new *means* through which politics was being carried out.

Hence the symmetric surprise of those who rejected the politicization of knowledge made by science studies – 'Look! There are no politicians in my lab, why do you say it's political?' – as well as those who accused us of having sanitized it – 'Look! There are no activists there, no ordinary citizens, how could you claim it has been made political?'. The double element of surprise was comprehensible enough: science and technology are political, yes, but by *other* means. The machinery of what is officially political is only the tip of the iceberg compared with the many other activities generated by many more 'activists' than those who claim to do politics per se.

I continue to believe that the discovery of this hidden continent remains the great breakthrough of science studies, a breakthrough that was made in the very early work of the Edinburgh school (Barnes & Shapin, 1979) and maintained all the way through to the more radical transformations of gender, body and animal life that were addressed by feminist scholars (Haraway, 1997). In this regard, de Vries' example of the blood screening affair is particularly telling: out of the lab came different associations (or propositions) on what it is for Dutch women of a certain age and status to have babies. From now on, politics is something entirely different from what political scientists believe: it is the building of the cosmos in which everyone lives, the progressive composition of the common world (Latour, 2004). What is common to this vast transformation is that politics is now defined as the agonizing sorting out of conflicting *cosmograms* (Tresch, 2005). Hence the excellent name Isabelle Stengers has proposed to give to the whole enterprise, that of *cosmopolitics*, meaning, literally, the politics of the cosmos (Stengers, 1996) – and not some expanded form of internationalism (Beck, 2006).

But as de Vries nicely shows, this new wine was put, at first, into old bottles. The initial reaction of STS scholars was not to undermine the age-old definitions of politics but to see how to bring science into politics. This could be done in two ways, neither of which changed the general scheme. Either we could extend the *same* habits of thought that had been developed in parliaments and on streets to each and every one of those far-fetched new sites, or we could ask scientists and engineers to shrink back to the official sites of politics and render their activity accountable to citizens or their representatives. The first solution was to say 'everything is political' but without explaining how the checks and balances of democracy could be extended and made efficient in those exotic domains – hence the accusation of having ended up in some forms of depolitization. The second solution was to say:

'Let's find a solution to mix the public and the experts'. Important work has been done in this way by Sheila Jasanoff, Brian Wynne, Nick Rose, Michel Callon, Harry Collins and many others.

The shortcomings of those two moves – one to expand politics to everything and the other to bring science and technology back to the arenas of 'politics as usual' – is that they equally retain the definition of politics taught in political science departments. To use an expression from chess, de Vries' opening move marks a radical departure from the usual game: What if the definition of politics were to be reshaped as deeply as the definition of science has been by STS? Not simply expanded or shrunk but entirely *redistributed*?

'No Issue, No Politics'

In contrast to de Vries, I do not believe that returning to Aristotle is helpful. I don't find much in the Greek ideal of the city that can be reused, unless one is giving commencement addresses in the neoclassical hall of so many of our campuses. Nodding to the busts of Demosthenes and Pericles once in a while can't do any harm, but the adequate resources might be much closer at hand: instead of Aristotle, let's turn to the pragmatists and especially to John Dewey (1954 [1927]). Following Noortje Marres' reinterpretation of Dewey (Marres, 2005, 2007), de Vries redefines politics as neither a type of procedure nor a domain of life. Politics is not some essence; it is something that moves; it is something that has a trajectory. If I have understood both of them correctly, the various meanings of the adjective 'political' should now qualify certain moments, stages or segments in the complex and rather erratic destiny of issues (more on this later).

Against the rather enucleated version of pragmatism proposed by Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, that is pragmatism at its best. We are reminded here of the etymology of the name that designates this as yet undervalued political philosophy: for being pragmatist, you need *pragmata*, a Greek term to be sure, but one that resonates much more vividly than *polis* or *poeisis* to our contemporary ears. The radical departure pragmatism is proposing is that 'political' is not an adjective that defines a profession, a sphere, an activity, a calling, a site, or a procedure, but it is what qualifies a *type of situation*. Instead of saying: 'Define a procedure and then whatever will go through will be well taken care of', pragmatism proposes that we focus on the objects of concern and then, so as to handle them, produce the instruments and equipment necessary to grasp the questions they have raised and in which we are hopelessly entangled.

'Object' is of course the wrong word. Dewey's term was 'unexpected and unattended consequences of collective actions', summarized by Marres in terms of 'issues and their trajectories'. This is exactly what Dewey, taking his cue from Walter Lippmann, called the '*problem of the public*' (Lippmann, 1993 [1927]). Here is a Copernican revolution of radical proportions: to finally make politics turn around topics that generate a public around them instead of trying to define politics *in the absence* of any

issue, as a question of procedure, authority, sovereignty, right and representativity. As Marres has so forcefully summed up this whole line of thought: 'No issue, no politics!'.

In my view, contrary to most philosophies, science studies has made us realize retrospectively that politics has always been *issue-oriented*. Pragmatism, much more than Aristotelism, is the political philosophy that has developed the tools to follow the *consequences* of actions when these are unknown or when they overflow the boundaries of routines. As Lippmann so clearly stated against any dream of expert-based technical democracy:

> Yet it is controversies of this kind, the hardest controversies to disentangle, that the public is called in to judge. Where the facts are most obscure, where precedents are lacking, where novelty and confusion pervade everything, the public in all its unfitness is compelled to make its most important decisions. The hardest problems are those which institutions cannot handle. They are the public's problems. (Lippmann, 1993 [1927]: 121)

At this point, one could wax philosophical and remind the readers of *Social Studies of Science* that in the '*Res-publica*' of our Latin heritage lies the word '*res*', which means at once an assembly and the topic, issue or state of affairs that is at stake. Heidegger has, in the same way, milked dry the etymology of the old German and old English 'Thing', which used to mean not an object thrown out of all assemblies (*Gegenstand*), but what brings together people *because* they disagree (Harman, 2002). To sum up, in this general shift 'from objects to things' as I have proposed it, we are no longer dealing with matters of fact, but rather with *matters of concern* (Latour, 2005; Latour & Weibel, 2005).

Whatever the term one wishes to use – object, thing, gathering, concern – the key move is to make all definitions of politics turn *around* the issues instead of having the issues enter into a ready-made political sphere to be dealt with. First define how things turn the public into a problem, and only then try to render more precise what is political, which procedures should be put into place, how the various assemblies can reach closure, and so on. Such is the hard-headed *Dingpolitik* of STS as opposed to the human-centred *Realpolitik*.

The Same Issue, but Five Meanings of the Word 'Political'

Two things should, by now, be clear: first, the discovery by STS scholars that science and technology participate in much more radical and obvious ways within cosmopolitics than the few organs of government; second, that politics, even in the narrower way in which it has been conceived by political sciences, has always been in effect an issue-oriented activity. But a third question remains: if politics is always turning around issues, *how* does it turn around them? Are we able to qualify different moments in the trajectory of an issue with different meanings of the adjective 'political'? In the same way as stars in astronomy are only stages in a series of transformations that astronomers have learned to map, issues offer up many different aspects depending on where they are in their life histories.

De Vries' example provides a nice way to follow totally *different* meanings of the *same* issue. The biomedical tests he is following are 'political' in the sense that they produce new associations between humans and non-humans (like all activities). Let's call that 'political-1' and let's accept that this is one of the new meanings of the term that science studies has brought to the attention of the various political theorists by resurrecting in effect one of Marx's definitions of materialism (MacKenzie & Wacjman, 1999). Every new non-human entity brought into connection with humans modifies the collective and forces everyone to redefine all the various cosmograms. This is one of the new important meanings of the general term of cosmopolitics.

But it is also political in the pragmatists' sense. The blood screening test has consequences that entangle many unanticipated actors without biologists and physicians having developed any instruments to represent, follow, take care of, or anticipate those unexpected entanglements. Let's call this stage 'political-2' and connect it to Lippmann and Dewey's beautiful argument that the public is always *a problem*. Whenever an issue generates a concerned and unsettled public, this is 'political-2'. The two first stages are clearly different segments of the same issue. For instance, the almost daily discovery of extra-solar planetary systems is political-1 – we don't live in the same cosmos with or without other livable planets; but it is not political-2 since there is no public at large, at least not yet, which has been rendered problematic by the penetration of those planets in the design of our cosmograms. Political scientists would be wrong to say planets in other solar systems have nothing to do with politics (they do, we science students insist), but they would be right to say that planets are not (not yet) political in the same sense as the fate of the genetically modified organism or the election of the new French president, for instance.

De Vries then points out another moment in the trajectory of the issue that is also political, in still another sense. Let's call it 'political-3'. This is when the machinery of government tries to turn the problem of the public into a clearly articulated question of common good and general will, and fails to do so (de Vries, 2007: 19). The Dutch cabinet, according to de Vries, failed, to be sure, but at least it had taken upon itself to make this issue bear upon the great question of Dutch sovereignty. It had tried to bring this matter of concern under the Sphere (Sloterdijk, 2005) of the Commonwealth. Here we are clearly much closer to the hard core of political theory, from Machiavelli to Schmitt – and probably slightly closer to what Aristotle could mean by the *polis* of which every free man is only a part. The cabinet managed to take up this issue as one of those that engages what it is for the Dutch to be Dutch, turning it into a question of life and death. Here the blood screening test became part of what I have called the Political Circle: Can the whole be simultaneously what gives the Law and what receives the Law so as to produce autonomy and freedom (Latour, 2003)?

Just as not all stars have to end up as black holes or as red dwarfs, not all issues have to become political-3. But when they are in that stage, they look indeed very different from all the others. Actually, they do register

differently in the new instruments that science students have developed to follow the life history of issues (Rogers & Marres, 1999; Rogers, 2005).

The great interest of de Vries' paper is to define yet another segment along the trajectory of issues, one that he associates, rightly in my view, with the deliberation of mini-kings. Fully conscious citizens, endowed with the ability to speak, to calculate, to compromise and to discuss together, meet in order to 'solve problems' that have been raised by science and technology. De Vries is wrong, however, in making fun of this naive idea of what political action should be. It is simply *another* possible fate for an issue, one that we could call 'political-4'. This Habermasian moment is not an absurd way of dealing with issues; it's simply what happens when issues have stopped being political-3 or -2, and have been metabolized to the point when they can be absorbed by the normal tradition of deliberative democracy. Global warming is certainly not in this stage – nor is the case of extra-solar planets – but innumerable issues are perfectly amenable as problems to be solved by one of the many procedures that have been invented to produce the consensus of rationally minded citizens. To be sure, de Vries is right in resisting the temptation of so many administrators to believe that *all issues* should be dealt with as puzzles to be solved. This is the sad dream of 'governance' that would replace politics-3 by assemblies of well-behaved problem-solvers, but it would be foolish not to recognize that it is a *plausible* way for an issue to leave one arena (the public as a problem) and enter into another one (the public as a solution).

This detection of the possible Habermasian moment in the life history of an issue is especially important because there is still another meaning of political, one that de Vries alludes to without really dwelling upon it: this is when an issue has *stopped* being political-4, -3, or even -2, at least for a while, because it has become part of the daily routine of administration and management. The silent working of the sewage systems in Paris has stopped being political, as have vaccinations against smallpox or tuberculosis. It is now in the hands of vast and silent bureaucracies that rarely make the headlines. As to the distribution of gender roles, it has been so thoroughly 'naturalized' that it seems at first to be totally outside politics. Should we abstain from calling those issues political in another sense of the adjective? Of course not, because not only did they used to be loudly disputed controversies (historians of science and technology, feminist scholars, do nothing else but 'repoliticizing' them through a kind of historical reverse engineering), but also because they might reopen at any moment, as is clear with the two examples of sewage systems and vaccination above. Let's call this stage 'political-5'. This is the stage that fascinated Michel Foucault as suggested by this much-abused expression of 'governmentality': all those institutions appear on the surface to be absolutely *apolitical*, and yet in their silent, ordinary, fully routinized ways they are perversely the most important aspects of what we mean by living together – even though no one raises hell about them and they hardly stir congressmen out of their parliamentary somnolence.

TABLE 1
Summary of some of the successive meanings of political through which a given issue might pass

Meanings of 'political'	*What is at stake in each meaning*	*Examples of movements that detected it*
Political-1	New associations and cosmograms	STS
Political-2	Public and its problems	Dewey, pragmatism
Political-3	Sovereignty	Schmitt
Political-4	Deliberative assemblies	Habermas
Political-5	Governmentality	Foucault, feminism

I am sure that there exist many more stages in the natural history of issues, but it's interesting to see that (1) every one of them can be called 'political' albeit in a totally different meaning of the word and (2) that the first and fifth are taken as totally 'apolitical' for everyone but historians of science, feminist scholars and various science students. I propose to use the word 'cosmopolitics' to cover all the five meanings (to which should of course be added the many different meanings of the adjective 'scientific' that have been uncovered by science studies [Latour, 2004]).

Conclusion: Giving Limits to 'Everything is Political'

In the end, yes, 'everything is (cosmo)political' but not at all in the same way. De Vries' piece allows us to avoid lumping together under one big umbrella different segments in the trajectory of issues that have to be carefully mapped out by science students. The advantage of the scheme shown in Table 1 is that it might allow us to simultaneously hold to our great discovery – political-1 – while continuing to deflate somewhat the domain of the political.

So far, most discussions around the question of technical democracy have been limited to only one segment in the life history of issues, to political-4, which is certainly not the most widespread. This is probably the reason why the work done on 'public participation' in science and technology studies often has such an unrealistic tone. For the pragmatist definition of political-2, by contrast, there is nothing especially exalting about going political … To make a thing public is only a moment in the life of an issue, an intense and uncertain episode to be sure, but neither its first nor its most final. And contrary to Aristotelian ideals, to be a citizen fusing one's existence with that of the City as in political-3 is not so great. For Lippmann, for instance, having to deal with issues in a political-2 way only means that we are in the dark about the consequences of our actions. Worse, it means that the normal routines of actions have broken down somehow, and that no administration, no government, no public officials have been able to find a rule for them. Political-2 is the adjective designating that something went wrong. It is not the glorious light that shines on the exalted citizen taking a stand on every issue on earth. This of course flies in the face of the

somewhat hysterical requirements of 'people's participation in scientific and technical decisions'. *Not* having to participate should remain the ideal and is of course the most widely distributed response to calls for action.

The table might also explain why the slogan 'everything is political' looks so empty and, in the end, so depoliticizing. There is no cognitive, mental and affective equipment requiring all of us to be constantly implicated, involved or engaged with the working of the Paris sewage system, the search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the development of stem cell research in California, global warming, peer-to-peer software, new accounting procedures for European companies, and so on. Expanding the range of concerns to every bit of science and technology without giving us the tools and equipment to follow them is indeed counter-productive. After some courageous involvement the would-be citizens, crushed by the fabulous expansion of their worries, would throw up their hands in despair … and fall back to sleep.

But it's just as improbable that the masses of new issues can all be brought back to the usual sites we associate with political traditions or to political-3. And this is where the search for political relevance is most often empty because it fails to elaborate and design the Thing, that is, the ad hoc assembly, uniquely adequate for the issue at hand. There is no sense in saying that global warming, DNA probes, river pollution, new planetary systems, the building of a fusion research demonstrator, and so on, will all go through the same street demonstrations, the same parliamentary debates and the same governmental shuttles. Each new issue deserves its own protocol because it has already overflowed the limits of the usual entanglements that we know how to care for. In de Vries' example what went wrong was not the innovation itself, nor the idea that there is something political in it, but the vacuous claim that the normal routines of governmental action could have dealt with a new and unattended entanglement.

De Vries' paper reminds all of us in science studies that so far we have only been following one-half of those changes: we have been good at tracing the constant innovations of science and technology, but we have been somewhat lazy in expecting that all of those new matters of concern will find a place inside the vast dome of already assembled democratic politics (-3 or -4). They won't: not because democracy is impossible, but because each assemblage deserves its assembly. It would be a great advance for science studies, if, having shaken the explanatory power of the 'social', we could also secularize politics by bringing into the foreground the 'public thing'. Then, we might begin to regain the political relevance that the early founders of the field rightly believed to be so important. The progressive composition of the common world would then be defined therefore by two basic elements: *what* are the things politics should turn around and *how* it is going to turn around those things.

Note

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