

Political Ontology and Practical Ontology. Continuing a Debate

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ABSTRACT: *This supplement contains Mario Blaser's response to the concepts of Political Ontology and Practical Ontology as discussed by Casper Bruun Jensen in his paper »Practical Ontologies Redux«. The paper was published in Berliner Blätter (issue 84) in 2021, edited by Michaela Meurer and Kathrin Eitel. Additionally, this supplement includes a response by Jensen addressing Blaser's critique.*

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Redescribing political ontology (once again): A rejoinder to Casper Bruun Jensen

by Mario Blaser

It has been a bit over a decade that I started to use the label »political ontology« to refer to an analytics that I saw emerging at the intersection of, on the one hand, debates on what has since been dubbed the »ontological turn in anthropology« and, on the other hand, developments in Science and Technology Studies inflected by material-semiotics.¹ Taking shape through collective work with co-thinkers Marisol de la Cadena and Arturo Escobar as well as other fellow travellers, the analytics has been received with mixed reviews. Some interlocutors have run with it and developed it further according to their own needs, while many (perhaps many more) have found various faults in it. Among the latter, however, have predominated what I would characterize as misrepresentations — for which the only response I could give is: »I am not saying that« — and/or as misunderstanding of the analytics« premises — for which the response would be: »please read more carefully.« While a bit annoying, neither of these kinds of critiques have energized me enough to write a response as I felt there was not much for me (or for more attentive readers) to learn in the process. In this barren critical scenario, it is truly a treat to engage in intellectual wrestling with fellow

travellers who both are up to speed with the analytics' premises and are beyond suspicion of engaging in an intellectually sterile exercise of strawman bashing. This is the case of Casper Bruun Jensen's recent discussion of ›political ontology‹ in *Berliner Blätter*, edited by Michaela Meurer and Kathrin Eitel (2021), I have been in an ongoing, albeit intermittent, conversation with Jensen about the issues raised in his piece which have always pushed me to redescribe my position in order to sharpen its contours. This, however, is the first time that we put into paper an attempt to clarify how we see our respective projects; where they share ground and where they diverge. Thus, I am truly grateful for the opportunity opened by his critical piece.

To proceed with my response and make it also a worthwhile read for ›onlookers‹ to this conversation, I begin by summarizing how Jensen characterizes his own projects to then, in the following section extract what he singles out as points of divergence with (my brand of) political ontology.² Next, I would respond to some of the critiques implicitly or explicitly associated with marking these points of divergence and highlight where, by contrast, I see our mutual divergences at work. I close by reflecting on where an ontologically-informed critique might make a difference.

Practical ontology: description as (critical) practice of world building

Jensen's (re)introduces his project of practical ontology by way of retracing some of the original insights derived from STS sources which he then puts into conversation with the ›ontological turn in anthropology‹ and political ontology.³ A brief summary of his narrative could hinge on how he characterizes the difference between (the singular) practical ontology as an analytical orientation, and (the plural) practical ontologies as constellations of practices to be explored.

I will begin with the plural ›practical ontologies‹ for it condenses both the original insight being drawn from STS and the grounding, so to speak, of practical ontology as an analytical orientation. What STS have shown, tells us Jensen, is that »[r]ather than finding ourselves in a world pre-constituted by a set of basic ontological building blocks, we are observers of, and participants in, worlds, which are shaped by proliferating and transformable elements and agencies« (Jensen 2021:95). Or, put otherwise, there is no ultimate ground (or transcendent reality) »but rather innumerable simultaneous efforts to create and stabilize variable grounds.« Precisely those efforts to create and stabilize variable grounds (or worlds/realities) are what constitute the constellations to be explored by practical ontology as an analytical orientation. For the clarity of the subsequent discussion, it is helpful to pause briefly to indicate that these constellations of practical ontologies can, and are, referred to later on in Jensen's article with another term, one shared with political ontology: ›the pluriverse.‹

Jensen (2021:101) describes the relation between the singular practical ontology and the plural practical ontologies thus:

In the singular, practical ontology is a profoundly open-ended orientation to exploring how and by whom such worlds are performed, maintained, challenged, transformed, or destroyed. In the plural, it describes specific and distinctive worlds in terms of their composition, maintenance, etc.—*as described or otherwise performed by the researcher* (emphasis mine).

The italicized bit in the quote is quite crucial as it closes the circle connecting practical ontology as analytical orientation and practical ontologies as constellations of practices via the role of description, for

our own descriptions morph into small-scale experiments in world-building, speculative propositions, which are placed among those of everybody else. Our descriptions analyses and activities contribute to shaping worlds, together with, or in opposition to, everybody else (Jensen 2021:102).

Even if it might result obvious to many readers, it is worth stressing two things: first, that »description« is standing here for all kinds of world-building practices, and second, that speaking of descriptions in this way is tantamount to speaking of »efforts to create and stabilize variable grounds.« And here is worth pausing again to stress Jensen's point: the researcher's descriptions are also involved in efforts to create and stabilize certain grounds. In connection to this, he rightly points out that ontological approaches have been unfairly criticized for their apparent inability or unwillingness to critique or promote changes to the status quo. This criticism, he points out, makes sense only if you assume that critique is premised on having rather stable targets and categories (i.e., stable grounds). Practical ontology moves counter this presumption of »conventional critique«, for it is a mode of analysis that destabilizes ›grounds‹ and renders targets and categories »fuzzy or cause them to disperse« (Jensen 2021:95). And this is done precisely through description and re-description of the constellations of the various practices that are trying to stabilize variable grounds. However, Jensen points out, the absence of ›conventional critique‹ and practical ontology's penchant for description should not be conflated with disinterest in intervening in »urgent critical matters of concern«, quite contrary it is precisely the destabilizing effect of its descriptions and redescrptions what constitutes the critical intervention. »Practical ontology embodies speculative dispositions to activate heterogenous resources for performative, re-descriptive purposes« (Jensen 2021:99).

To summarize the above with terms popularized by Actor-Network Theory one could say that, as critical analytics, practical ontology works by way of opening and destabilizing black-boxes (stabilized grounds/established descriptions). It does so, first, on the premise/empirical conclusion that those black-boxes are like the cells of a grid thrown over or built from and upon a pluriverse that is more complex and heterogenous than what the smooth surfaces of those black-boxes give away; and then by redescrbing these black-boxes precisely as being overflowed by complexities and heterogeneities. However, I want to highlight an important but backgrounded point in Jensen's characterization of redescription: this is simply that redescription unavoidably implies the production of another set of black boxes (other grounds), at least for the time being. It is true, the new black boxes (grounds/descriptions) might be presented with much self-awareness of their speculative and provisional character, and this might render them more open and inviting to be challenged but will nevertheless constitute a bracketing of complexities and heterogeneities that overflow their bounds.

Notice that, in keeping with the premise of the pluriverse, I am not questioning how much complexity and heterogeneity a given description can account for – for complexity and heterogeneity are boundless- but rather how it holds in relation to other descriptions (i.e., how it becomes stabilized) and with what effects within *the situation we are interested in*. I will soon return to the italics, but for now I just want to conclude by pointing out that, notwithstanding Jensen's emphasis on the destabilizing impetus of practical ontology's re-

descriptions, the latter also carry with them a similar impetus towards generating new kinds of stabilizations. And it is precisely in the differential attention that Jensen pays to both impetus where I think lies the root of certain inconsistency that I find in the way he criticizes political ontology. But before getting to that we still need to see how practical ontology and political ontology compare to each other, according to Jensen and according to me.

Divergences (according to Jensen); from Convergences

Jensen tells us that, connecting the original insights that practical ontology draws from STS with those drawn from the ontological turn in anthropology, »facilitated an expansion of material connections into explorations of more free-ranging relations, ›from science to dreams and back again« (Jensen 2021:99). Put in other words, the attention that the ontological turn paid to ›other cosmologies‹ further complexifies how we should conceive of the heterogeneity of descriptions veering for stability amidst each other. All this leaves practical ontology pretty close to political ontology. In effect, the insights that practical ontology draws from STS, and were described in the previous section, plus the intensified sense of complex heterogeneities brought about by the ontological turn in anthropology are uncontroversial for political ontology as well. We are operating here on the same premises. So much so that we end up with remarkably similar descriptions of what each project entails. Below I quote a succinct description of political ontology interspersing in bracket and italics some of the terms used by Jensen (and by myself in my retelling of his arguments) to further highlight the convergences.

The term political ontology is meant to simultaneously imply a certain political sensibility, a problem space, and a modality of analysis or critique. The political sensibility [*orientation*] can be described as a commitment to the pluriverse—the partially connected ... unfolding of worlds [*constellations of practical ontologies*]*—in the face of the impoverishment implied by universalism [I have later spoken of the one-world world, a term we will see Jensen picks up too].* Of course, the pluriverse is a heuristic [*experimental/speculative*] proposition, a foundationless foundational claim, which in the context of the previous discussion, means that it is an experiment on bringing itself into being. The problem space can then be characterized as the dynamics through which different ways of worlding sustain [*describe/ground/stabilize*] themselves even as they interact, interfere, and mingle with each other. Finally, and in contrast with other modalities of [*conventional*] critique or analysis, political ontology is not concerned with a supposedly external and independent reality (to be uncovered or depicted accurately); rather, it is concerned with reality making [*performatively describing and re-describing*], including its own participation in reality making. In short, political ontology is concerned with telling stories that open up a space for, and enact, the pluriverse (Blaser 2013:552 – 53).

Aside from making evident the relevance of the project in relation to a problem (i.e., the impoverishment of the pluriverse implied by the operations of the one-world world) - a point to which I will also return below-, it seems to me that the rest of this description of political ontology shows a rather evident convergence with practical ontology's premises. So, where do the projects diverge according to Jensen? It is in political ontology's »apparent faith ... in the existence and powers of the one-world world (Jensen 2021:100).« For him, the one-

world world »evokes a series of stark dichotomies that rigidify ontological differences.« In addition, specific conflicts like the one I have discussed in some of my works between Innu people and wildlife managers, »[get] a panoramic inflection as illustrative of the exclusio-nary dynamic of the modern one-world world in general;« and »once the one-world world is blown up to a quasi-universal level we end up with the West or Europe as the big others in stories of ontological opposition.« (Jensen 2021:100). Finally, he argues, by constantly talking up »the capacity of the west to impose,« political ontology contributes to »enhancing that capacity and reify a single macro-ontological difference« (Jensen 2021:100).

The corrective that Jensen offers to all these problems is to begin from »the observation that both the West or Europe are ontologically as holey as Swiss cheese;« this makes it easier »to describe cross-cutting practical ontologies as a lattice or patchwork of uncommon but not unbridgeable micro-worlds« (Jensen 2021:100) Such move resituates actors away from being »confined ›within‹ an ontology« rendering them able to exceed any particular ontology by moving in many directions and dimensions, and by creating unlikely, sometimes successful, new cosmopolitical alliances.« (Jensen 2021:101). This capacity to bridge micro-worlds is of the outmost importance. For what? The response is quite surprising:

even if it is often true that the one-world world wins, as when Western medicine and colonial regimes run roughshod over acupuncture or Ayurvedic medicine, this outcome is not given. Ontological surprises can emerge from lateral alliances between Yolngu people and ecologists, science fiction writers and climate scientists, or between anthropologists and their diverse friends and interlocutors. (Jensen 2021:102)

What surprises me is the inconsistency between Jensen's critique of political ontology‹ faith in ›the existence and power of the one-world world‹ and his recognition that sometimes the one-world world does seem to exist and has the power to run roughshod over noncompliant practices. But if the first part of the italicised sentence makes evident this inconsistency, the proviso that »this outcome is not given« sounds like an implicit indictment to political ontology, which, one should assume, does see such outcome as a given. But why would Jensen assume that this is the case? To get an answer we need to start walking backwards through the problems that Jensen explicitly and implicitly attributes to political ontology.

Divergences (according to me)

I begin with a key slippage in Jensen's characterization of political ontology. This is the conflation of modernity or the one-world world with the West (or Europe), the latter understood as a ›container bag‹ ontology within which people live! This is perhaps the point in which Jensen comes closer to those critiques that in the introduction I characterized as misrepresentations and misunderstandings. For one, I never use the term West or Europe as overarching labels to refer to the practices that concern political ontology. The exception to this is at the beginning of the article I just mentioned above, in which, in the context of countering then-dominant assumptions of an all-encompassing modernity (paradigmatically embodied by Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History*), I used the term Europe explicitly as a metonym for modernity, understood as a particular set of practices. But more important than the terms being used is that such conflation disregards the rather explicit point I have made repeatedly about how political ontology conceives ›ontology,‹ including in, for example, the very same article I just mentioned. I quote extensively to illustrate the point:

It is assumed [by critics] that political ontology attributes a given ontology or set of practices to a given group—Westerners, indigenous peoples, or what have you. In fact, political ontology is concerned with practices, performances, and enactments and not with specific groups. One can speak of a given worlding or ontology as long as one can trace its enactment. Moreover, practices do not need to be entirely self-coherent and consistent, although one may find more or less coherence and consistency in some situations than in others. Yet, the lack of coherence or consistency neither implies that all worldings are modern [*keep in mind here that I was making an argument against the assumption of an all-encompassing modernity, in part advanced through the rather silly argument that practices that are ›other‹ to modern ones do not exist because, well, nothing is always coherently, consistently and purely ›other!‹*] nor that the term modern cannot be used to label and single out a particular way of worlding. ... [I]n talking about particular worldings or ontologies, the image I would like to convey is of enactments complexly entangled in non-Euclidian fashion.... This is a pluriverse constituted by intra-acting worldings that share partial connections. Thus, while these worldings are coemergent, they do not share an overarching principle that would make their entanglement a universe. Rather, their partial connections often constitute the sites in which it is possible to discern how what is brought into existence by a certain worlding might interfere and conflict with what is brought into existence by another. (Blaser 2013:553)

This is clearly at variance with the conception of ontology as a container bag often attributed to political ontology. If the attribution were true, it would indeed warrant Jensen's implicit claim that political ontology is somehow oblivious to »cross-cutting practical ontologies as a lattice or patchwork of uncommon but not unbridgeable micro-worlds.« But, such conception of ontology is not political ontology's, as we have just seen! Indeed, quite contrary to being oblivious to them, political ontology does pay attention to ›lateral alliances‹ forming lattices of uncommon but not unbridgeable micro-worlds, it is just that until now it has found some of them particularly deserving of closer scrutiny. The peculiarity of these particular lateral alliances boils down to their capacity to generate a rather puzzling occurrence, an occurrence that political ontology names with a label borrowed from John Law: the one-world world!

I want to recognize that it has been Jensen's piece what has prompted me to spell out explicitly the point above, which I mistakenly had taken for obvious for a long time. In this sense, Jensen's concern with political ontology's faith in the existence and power of the one-world world reminds me of that encounter Bruno Latour recalls in the introduction to *Pandora's Box*, when during a conference someone confronted him with the question of whether he believed in reality. Of course he did, it just was not the same kind of reality his interlocutor was assuming. Of course political ontology believes in the existence and power of the one-world world, just not in the way in which Jensen thinks it does it! For political ontology the one-world world exists as an effect of (to use Jensen's terms) a particular kind of lateral alliances that connect a variety of heterogenous micro-worlds (or enacted descriptions). The particularity resides in that these connections are systematically enrolled into what for lack of a better expression I will call attempts at generating an effect of universality. Political ontology describes these attempts as embodying a *relatively successful redescription* (enactment) of the pluriverse as a one-world world. I would say that Jensen's own final invocation of the latter's existence and power attests to these attempts' degree of success, even if intermittent! But let be clear, for political ontology, this success is not a given (as

Jensen's assumes) but a puzzling incognita, how is this effect of universality achieved? and how can it be destabilized? These are key questions propelling political ontology. First, because the feat of a relatively successful effect of universality is a far from transparent achievement (it must be constantly reproduced in myriads of very heterogenous circumstances), and second because this feat seems connected to the constant suppression of a multiplicity of other modes of existence which while never complete, is nevertheless consequential.

It is true that my brand of political ontology has been more interested in describing how the one-world world succeeds (relatively) in enacting itself as such, but this is because I found it very important to get a sense of how it does it, not because (to keep using Jensen's terms) I deny other potential kinds of lateral alliances between heterogenous micro-worldings. I have never claimed nor implied that ›bridges‹ between heterogenous worlding practices do not exist or cannot be built, I have just focused on situations in which such bridges have not succeeded, or where the bridges end up becoming one more relay of the one-world world; often because a one-way bridge has been imposed and the imposition has been occluded. Other potential lateral alliances, which can be mobilized to disrupt the ones that beget the one-world world, are something that I am starting to explore in earnest in my forthcoming book. And I am just starting because it is only now that I feel I may have what might be a potentially more robust description of what transpires in those situations. And, just in case the premises on which political ontology builds on have slipped out of the reader's mind again, let be clear that when I speak of more robust description I do not mean ›accurate‹ but rather with potential to hold better and make a difference, precisely through the lateral alliances it might establish!

As I hinted at above, I am interested in producing descriptions that make a specific kind of difference, that is, descriptions that can render those operations through which the one-world world performs itself a little bit less successful. And, for this, not just any kind of lateral alliance between micro-worldings will do - as the point that the one-world world is the effect of one type of lateral alliances should make evident. And here we come back to a point of divergence between my political ontology and Jensen's practical ontology that I mentioned before: political ontology makes explicit what is the problem it is trying to tackle, practical ontology does not, or at least not as clearly and explicitly as it should.⁴ This is key to understanding why, I think, Jensen's description of these projects‹ divergence does not hold that well. To explain I need to get back to the key premise both analytics share, that of a pluriverse of ways of worlding or, to use Jensen's term, of a constellation of practical ontologies veering for stabilization.

On making a difference in the pluriverse

If we take the proposition of a pluriverse of ways of worlding as a basic premise, then we must assume that lateral alliances between those uncommon but not unbridgeable worldings are happening all the time. In effect, that is how, rather than as a bunch of discrete units, the pluriverse holds up as a multiplicity - more than one but less than many, to use Strathern's famous refrain - that is constantly (re)becoming heterogenous and complex. However, there is a potential drawback in advancing the proposition of the pluriverse too strongly as a form of immanence, which I believe is the case for Jensen -though, in this, he follows the general trend in material semiotics versions of STS.⁵ In this rendering, and since it is in its very nature/definition to constantly be or become heterogenous and complex, the

pluriverse is always already there no matter what. But, if we go this way, the problem is that practical ontology, or political ontology, or *any description* for that matter, would be utterly redundant and insignificant in relation to the pluriversality of the pluriverse. In effect, they would (could) do no more than constantly express it; they would neither add nor subtract anything from its endless becoming complex and heterogeneous. In short, redescriptions would make no difference to the pluriverse. I believe it is in this drawback that the inconsistency of Jensen's critique of political ontology is riding, an inconsistency that shows again in the last paragraph of his article.

If it is worthwhile to experiment with practical ontology, it is thus not due to an impossible ambition of getting on top of these proliferating events [i.e., lateral alliances producing ›ontological surprises']. More humbly, but no less interesting or important, it is simply to try, as best we can, *to keep up to speed with the pluriverse*. And, in doing so, perhaps also playing our part in *keeping cosmopolitics alive* (emphasis in the original).

Let stress it: Jensen is telling us that what justifies practical ontology is that it enables those who experiment with it to keep up to speed with the pluriverse and keep cosmopolitics alive; these are the normative injunctions that come with practical ontology. But what does this all mean is not quite clear, because Jensen is not telling us ›why [he] says it,‹ he does not tell us in relation to what problem, or in which kind of world, such moves are worthwhile!

The first of Jensen's injunction, »*keep up to speed with the pluriverse*«, is somehow modest, it seems to implicitly advance the proposition that the pluriverse is always already there no matter what; thus, we cannot stay on top of it, but can (and must) keep up with it. But then, and since the pluriverse is there ›no matter what,‹ can we do otherwise? And, if we could, what happens if we do not keep up with it? Can the pluriverse cease to be? The second injunction, ›*keep cosmopolitics alive*‹, is more forceful, although still reticent in naming/describing the problem. Why do we need to keep cosmopolitics alive? Is it in risk of dying? What threatens it? Perhaps what political ontology calls the one-world world, or something of the sort? I believe that this ostensible reluctance to name the problem that practical ontology wants to intervene in part stems from the aforementioned lack of attention to the unescapable duplicity of all (re)descriptions, that is, that if they can destabilize established or black boxed descriptions/groundings, it is only by stabilizing (naming/describing) others. But this is only one part of where I think the reluctance to name the problem stems from, another one is certain (I would say unwarranted) discomfort with that which Jensen conceptualizes as ›big.‹

As we have seen, Jensen would rather not engage with what he characterizes as macro-world issues, that is, descriptions that he takes to be too ›panoramic‹ or big. In fact, he sees a focus on micro-worlds as a corrective to the potential reification political ontology falls in when its descriptions become panoramic. The problem is that, if one remains consistent with the premises that practical ontology and political ontology share, it quickly becomes evident that those micro-worlds he is more comfortable describing are anything but ›micro‹ or reification-free. Let me unfold the point beginning with a polemical question engaging one of Jensen's own descriptive categories: how is my ›one-world world‹ any more reified and panoramic a category than his ›earth system scientists‹ modelling the Mekong River? Arguably, it would be rather easy for an analysts interested in scientific controversies and the role of corporate sponsors to relativize that category and show how it leaks everywhere and it is far from being as homogeneous as its naming as a single ›thing‹ conveys. Of

course, Jensen could justifiably retort that he is not denying those controversies, rather he is not taking them into account *in this particular text* because they are not relevant to what he is trying to do in it, or at least not relevant until someone shows him otherwise. And, I would be very happy with this answer! This is because, even if he does not grant this dispensation to my description/category of one-world world, the potential relativization of our descriptions are the rule; precisely because they make sense (that is, hold better or worse) *in relation* to particular problems!

Here I am coming back to the point I already advanced. When you share the premise that descriptions do not operate on a stable ground but are rather about stabilizing some grounds (while destabilizing others), or to put it more simply, that frames of reference are relative, the pertinent critical question posed to a given description cannot be about whether it holds everything, everywhere and for all context, rather it should be if it holds in relation to the problem the description is trying to tackle. Why treating earth-system science [or the one-world world] as a black-box is the appropriate thing to do in this particular context, in this text? What does it achieve and how well it does it?

You may say, »fine, the discussion above puts Jensen's and your descriptions on an evened-out terrain ›reification-wise,‹ but what about their respective ›panoramacityness‹? You would surely agree that remaining in the description of the specificities of a (micro) problem is not the same as describing those specificities as part of a ›larger‹ problem, like the one-world world.« To this, I would simply respond that if you are relentlessly pushed to answer why the specificities of this (micro) problem have to be addressed/described in the way you say; why achieving what you want to achieve with a given text, for instance, is a good thing; you would very soon be describing a rather large problem; you will end up with a panoramic inflection the size of a world! In other words, having to give an answer to the demand, »say why you say it,« unavoidably corners any analyst into describing some macro-world, as much implicit and ephemeral as that description might be. After all, in the pluriverse it does not matter how much you zoom in, it is entire worlds all the way down!

To conclude, I want to come back to what seems like the Gordian knot Jensen's critique of political ontology trips over, namely, the status of the pluriverse. While the pluriverse constitutes a sort of foundational claim for both practical and political ontology, we have seen that advancing its immanence too strongly would render critique (as redescription) irrelevant. There is another possibility though, one in which the pluriverse is an effect, as much as the one-world world is. Although I will not expand on the point here (but see Blaser forthcoming), let me indicate that in such scenario we must take into account how certain constellations of practical ontologies or micro-worldings veering for stabilization get indeed differentially stabilized through their alliances. In this take, whether practices that are conducive to the one-world world effect are more effective than those conducive to the pluriverse effect matter; the specific shape of the pluriverse matters. And, in such context, what we do might make a difference. This is why the differential effectiveness of one-world world practices compared to pluriversal practices is what concerns political ontology. Yet, political ontology is keenly and expressly aware that, in order to make a difference in that balance, it has to successfully name the problem and the actors/actants/agencies that compose it, that is, it has to stabilize its descriptions so that they hold among constellations of other practical ontologies and their descriptions. Ironically, but only so, one could say that it is precisely at the moment in which a practical ontology resolutely names the problem it seeks to tackle that a political ontology emerges. Thus, after all, it would seem practical ontology and political ontology are not that divergent, although it might be the case that

they are tackling different problems; but if this is the case, perhaps Jensen could now take this piece as a prompt to name the problem that concerns his practical ontology; say why you say it!

Notes

- 1 Of course, the term has an older and wider history, some but not all of which is connected to my use of it. Thus, in this paper I remain largely within the specificity that the label has in this particular intersection of debates.
- 2 I notice that Jensen lists Marisol de la Cadena among those in the political ontology camp, although he bases his critical evaluation only on my work, so I assume that, from his perspective, there is some differences between me and my colleague and co-thinker.
- 3 For a previous introduction of the ›practical ontology‹ project see Gad, Christopher, Jensen, and Winthereik (2015).
- 4 And this is quite surprising since elsewhere Jensen (2021b) has pointed out that »ethnographic configurations [or, in the terms used in this article, ›descriptions‹] find no better grounds than *dic cur hic* —why, here, now— or as Isabelle Stengers [...] has formulated it »say why you say it,« just in this way, on just this occasion.«
- 5 Again, I fully develop the point in Blaser (forthcoming).

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Exercises in Cosmopolitical Yoga

by Casper Bruun Jensen

During lockdown, I escaped boredom and frustration for a while by writing a short piece about practical ontologies for *Berliner Blätter's* special issue on »Ecological Ontologies«, edited by Michaela Meurer and Kathrin Eitel (2021). I paid respect to some crucial inspirations from STS and anthropology, but also alluded to some points of difference. As I have been given a chance to reply to Mario Blaser's thoughtful engagement with that piece, this appreciative context is important to recall. On the one hand, there is hardly anything duller than replies and replies-to-replies that dissolve into »men yelling indistinctly« (as my television subtitles noisy and chaotic scenes). On the other hand, few things are less insightful than conversations where all significant differences blur behind thick layers of curation and politesse. I prefer to think of this exchange as a kind of joking relationship, which is often more congenial to collective learning about sensitive issues than either backscratching or hostility.¹

The Stage

Mario points to various problems with my characterization of political ontology. Then he turns the critical gaze around and questions various aspects of practical ontologies. In line with Roy Wagner's (1975: 20) famous observation that »their misunderstanding of me was not the same as my misunderstanding of them,« the way we see those issues are different without exactly mirroring each other. I wrote that studies of practical ontologies appear more open-ended than those of political ontology, which tend to reify differences between modern and amodern worlds. Mario replies that no reification is intended, and he goes on to note that there is an unavoidable reductive aspect to any description. That is precisely why explication of one's project is so important. What political ontology is up

to is examining the puzzling reoccurrence of the modern one-world world and its effects of universality. Then he turns the tables. Am I perhaps not insufficiently attentive to the descriptive black boxes created by practical ontology? Isn't there a need to be explicit about the problems it seeks to solve? Is there, perhaps, an unstated project? Or none at all?

In one respect, there is nothing to discuss because—I assure Mario—I am only too aware of the distance between by position and a God's eye view. But maybe some differences can be detected when it comes to the particular aspects of events and situations each of us tends to become absorbed by, and to our respective ways of describing them. And they seem to relate to Mario's fondness for, and my aversion to, the notion of *the one-world world*.² This is where some misunderstandings seem to emerge.

Mario corrects my »conflation« of the one-world world and a »container bag ontology within which people live.« In a not-exactly-flattering comparison (to me at least), I am likened to the confused scientist who once worried whether Bruno Latour (1999) »believed in reality.« Just as Latour did believe in reality—only not in the same way as the benighted scientist—Mario also believes in the one-world world—just not in the naïve way I had imagined. »Of course,« political ontology »believes in the existence and power of the one-world world;« only not as a container world but rather a set of effects (of universality) that emerge from various practices and enactments. That it is an effect means that its success is never pre-ordained. But this only makes the »puzzling occurrence« of one-world world effects the more striking and »worthy of closer scrutiny.« Political ontology is interested in figuring out how those effects of universality are achieved and, ideally, how they can be destabilized.

Apparently, I had pulled out the weakest ontological straw arguments. This was embarrassing. After checking, though, I felt some relief. What I had written was that the one-world world evokes »stark dichotomies that tend to rigidify ontological differences« (Jensen 2021: 72). About Mario's analysis of problematic relations between Innu people and various representatives of the Canadian state (about how to deal with atîku/caribou), I wrote that towards the end it »gets a panoramic inflection as illustrative of the exclusionary dynamics of the modern one-world world in general« (72). And I referred to this as a »ballooning effect« with its own dangers. Nothing here insinuates that political ontology assumes a view of the one-world world as a container that surrounds everyone, or which is pressed down by a nefarious West (North, or Euro-America) on everybody. What the sentences suggest, instead, is that political ontology involves a characteristic analytical movement that *generates* a panoramic or ballooning *effect*. (I provide some receipts a bit later).

But if my brief characterization involves no conflation between the one-world world and a container bag ontology whence the confusion? Given the disproportional hostility with which ontological arguments have been greeted in anthropology, it is not impossible that Mario countered an expected straw attack with a standard defense. But perhaps something else is going on, which shows in the »of course« that pre-faces his announcement of faith in the existence and power of the one-world world. In that case, his imagined Latourian dialogue could be replaced with one inspired by Herman Melville's *Bartleby*: »Do you believe in the one-world world?« »I would prefer not to.«

What is the One-World World?

It is fruitful to return to John Law's (2015) original remarks on the one-world world. They were prepared for a workshop on the »Pluriverse and the Social Sciences,« organized in 2010 in St Johns, Newfoundland; later they were published in a special issue of *Distinktion: Journal of Scandinavian Social Theory* on »political materials,« and they overflow with

ambiguities. Law was concerned about »hegemonic ›Northern‹ strategies« that »naturalize mononaturalism and reduce indigenous realities to beliefs which may be discounted.« Off the bat, he contrasted a »European way of thinking,« for which »the world carries on by itself... outside us and we are contained inside it« with the view of Aboriginal people for whom that is not the case (Law 2015: 126 – 127). We are therefore faced with a very clear alternative: should we assume that the world is a container with all of us inside it, or rather »wrestle with the implications that worlds in the plural are enacted in different and power-saturated practices«? (128)

Readers acquainted with ANT will notice this as a rhetorical question. Plural enactments are specified as different from a »European way of thinking« and affiliated with Aboriginal people. But since plural enactments was an ANT idea in the first place (and thus, parenthetically, also very much part of a »European way of thinking«) this is not unlike watching a magician pulling his own rabbit out of a borrowed hat. And there are some other peculiarities. One is the apparent identification of container with one-world world: It is a one-world world (way of thinking) *because* it imagines the world as a container with people inside it. Yet it is easy to imagine worlds that universalize themselves (as the single world) without involving containers. For example, there could be processual, open-ended, one-worlds with no room or tolerance for any world averse to becoming.³ The seemingly gratuitous qualification of plural enactments as occurring »in different, power saturated practices« is also worthy of attention. It sounds *neither* like ANT nor ›Aboriginal‹ but rather like a concession to another »European way of thinking«—critical theory—which has also morphed into many versions and variants.

The dichotomy between a monotonous European container way of thinking and—everything else—creates immediate tensions because it is decisively undermined by much STS in general, and Law's own work in particular. It was replaced with incongruent and heterogeneous practices. Law admits to a sense of unease and he produces his own rather damning list of problems: the dichotomy binarizes (evidently), it oversimplifies, it hides Northern ontological difference, and it ignores non-Northern practices in the North. The obvious choice would then seem to be discarding the dichotomy and coming up with a better heuristic. But Law (2015: 128) prefers to keep it as a handy »shorthand« for highlighting how »single-reality doctrines were...worked up...embedded...reproduced and re-enacted... and transported to the South and imposed...«

In ANT terms, one problem with this strategy is the asymmetrical power it ascribes to »purification« over »hybridization.« At the level of discourse, a single ›natural‹ reality may well be assumed but at the level of practices, there is mixture and multiplicity. Since the latter is ANT's favoured playground, it is not surprising that Law is unable to maintain the pretence of a powerfully homogenizing »one-world metaphysics« for very long. This is clear from his constant pluralization: there are one-world and single-reality *doctrines*, here we can find *a* one-world explanation but over there we find another one-world metaphysics. In opposition to his starting point, Law ends by arguing that the one-world metaphysics (plural) of the North are not as powerful as »they« imagine, that they are raggedy, that they are »clad in rather erratic ...clothing,« and that they can be »unstitched «(Law 2015: 128. All in all, it looks as if the major problem with the one-world world has less to do with its massive powers than with its conceptual instability.

The One-World World Effect

Compared with Law, who carries on despite many self-doubts, Mario seems to have more faith in *the* one-world world. Some illustration is needed, and I will stick to the case I referred to in the first place. This was an ethnographic exploration of a complex situation where the Newfoundland government wanted to ban caribou hunting while the Innu people refused to stop hunting what for them is not caribou but atiku (Blaser 2016, 2018). The analysis revolved around problems that arose because »reasonable politics« is premised on »a modernist assumption of one world with multiple perspectives on it« (Blaser 2016: 549). The facts of this one world are established by Universal science which therefore comes to play »the primary role of arbiter in reasonable politics« (2016: 550).⁴ This is Law's one-world metaphysics in action, and it severely harms people, like the Innu, since »their claims are automatically disqualified as being unreasonable or unrealistic« (550).

In the middle realm of ethnographic description, we are presented with a shifting set of actors and with diverse encounters between Innu elders, wayward hunters, biologists, NGOs, mining corporations, and others. There are practices constitutive of atiku (hunting but also dreaming, sharing meat, singing, and performing rituals (Blaser 2018: 74) and conversely there are heterogeneous activities—aerial surveys, trackings, theories and models of population cycles and ethology, but also hunting reports—that, in the aggregate, enact caribou (Blaser 2018: 75).

Since it was clear that the Innu would not respect the incoming total government ban on hunting, and this would lead to escalating conflict, Mario joined Innu Elders to »stage an equivocation that would enable atiku and caribou to hold together« without simply reducing one to the other (Blaser 2018: 79). Thus, they argued that requiring hunters to follow Innu hunting protocols would be more effective than implementing an unenforceable ban. Wildlife officers agreed and the idea was also »well received« by people on the ground (Blaser 2018: 79n21). Yet, the proposal was scrapped at a higher ministerial level after public pressure, the ban was instituted, and tensions predictably rose. According to Mario, this cosmopolitical fiasco clearly shows that the Innu is not invited to participate in the composition of a common world. Then, the one-world reappears in full colonial regalia. The Innu could not be part of this composition because, »through the practices that constitute it, coloniality produces a ›zero point‹ of observation from which the colonizers cannot but see their own world constantly being reinforced as the only one« (Blaser 2018: 80).

This synopsis invites questions. Conceptually, why explain the whole sorry affair with reference to a single, colonial zero-point of observation, although there seemed to be widespread support—even among colonizers and scientists—for the Innu proposal? Empirically, if the crucial point is to examine the ›puzzling reoccurrence‹ of one-world world effects achieved through practices—why do we learn so little about the concrete practices and processes that led to the rejection?⁵ And given that the rejection—as far as one can tell—seems to have been brought about by an unpleasant amalgam of business, populism, and bureaucracy, what happened to *Universal Science* and the *scientific method* as primary tools of universalization?

After listening to me harp on about the importance of beginning every analysis from scratch, a frustrated Luhmann scholar once asked why that is necessary if the result always looks the same. I must have answered something like: »This sameness is the effect of your own fertile but too narrow theoretical imagination,« and I am pretty sure Mario would agree. But if sameness is never actually quite the same and the variations do matter, why must everything always revolve around the nebulous one-world world?

Must One Have a Project?

Mario wonders what motivates the study of practical ontologies, and he is particularly puzzled by the suggestion that they contribute to keeping cosmopolitics alive. »Is it at risk of dying?« he asks, and, if so, »what threatens it?

Political ontology has answers. The pluriverse doesn't simply exist, it is an ongoing and precarious construction that must be defended against one-world world effects, and that defense is precisely the urgent mission. But if the pluriverse just pluriverses along endlessly, as seems to be the case for practical ontology, there would seem to be no problem. Not only that, but there is hardly even any point since any description »would be utterly redundant and insignificant... neither add nor subtract anything ... would make no difference to the pluriverse.« So, we have another sharp contrast. While political ontology supports the pluriverse, practical ontology suffers from cosmopolitical commitment anxiety, and keeps fiddling at the edges.

In another piece (Jensen 2021), I adapted a motto—*dic cur hic*, say why here—from Isabelle Stengers (2008: 29), who borrowed it from G. W. Leibniz. Now Mario waves the sign back at me with a sense of glee: »Come on, man, why don't you ›say why you say it!« This isn't exactly the ›gotcha‹ moment that might be imagined, however. If the implication is that one must make explicit the ultimate »true reasons« (Stengers 2018: 29) for one's actions, there is indeed a problem. But that is not quite the point. Instead, the motto defines a requirement to be clear about why one argues in just this way on this occasion *without hiding behind general justifications*.

Might this be the pivot on which the difference between political and practical ontology hinges? That depends on whether righteous battle against one-world world effects operates like a general justification for political ontology. But the answer appears ambiguous. Whenever Universal Science and its avatars take center stage, we are certainly in the vicinity of such a general justification. At other times, however, one gets the impression that they mainly operate as rhetorical flourishes that hide the contingent, relative, or, as we like to say, ›situated‹, affairs and problems that truly mattered all along. Mario's description of his embrace of »the Yshiro ›life project‹ as an egalitarian event« after many years of interacting and collaborating with the Yrmo (Blaser 2019: 89), for example, is an excellent illustration of what it means »to say why you say it.« The value of that specific life project to him, given this history, is more important than any opposition it forms with a nebulous one-world world.

If the pluriverse is anything it is something by being pulled in many different directions by the doings of a multiplicity of actors. Although most of these doings are far from world-making or shattering, they are never »utterly redundant and insignificant.« This is the case whether we speak of the acts of Innu elders or conservationists, miners or anthropologists, and that is why we speak of the involved parties as actors rather than passive entities acted upon, or patients. Though it can be hard to swallow, it is seldom the case that those actors particularly need or want our guidance or protection, and it is also rare that we have much substantial to offer. One reason why I resist Mario's characterization of »keeping cosmopolitics alive« as a »normative injunction« is that it sounds like an empty, general justification for churning out advice nobody asked for.

And yet—social scientists, anthropologists, researchers—are *also* actors. In my capacity as self-assigned spokesperson for practical ontologies, I will thus affirm an experimental predilection, or *taste*, for multiplicity and variations. This leads to forms of conceptual and empirical inquiry less oriented to critique of well-known evils and more curious about surprising possibilities that occasionally emerge from cracks and crevices, at least occasionally. With a

taste for variations, the insistence on having a single, well-defined project seems like a form of deliberate self-obstruction, like choosing to play tennis with one arm tied to the back.

Exercises in Cosmopolitical Yoga

Until recently, I often heard anthropologists complaining that climate change was a false scientific objectification. The reason was that, according to their interlocutors, the weather had *always changed*. They probably saw themselves as courageous defenders who stood up for the situated knowledges of nonmodern peoples. Alas, they were also contributors to discourses and modes of inaction likely to have dire consequences for the same people down the line. I take this as illustrative of the danger of trusting too much in general justifications.

The point is not, of course, that scientific modelers really hold the objective truth while the anthropologists speak only for the naïve beliefs of those they work with. But there are usually better things to do than hammering away at scientific objectivity. To name just one, it is often more interesting to grapple with how divergent enactments enable different collectives to perceive, think, and do things that, while they are completely different from each other, all matter in their own ways. For example, the annoying likelihood that climate scientists might view their models as objective pales in comparison with the significance of what those models indicate: a near-future of profound, irreversible damages to landscapes, environments, people, and beings of very many kinds.

This has implications for keeping cosmopolitics alive, which resonate with Mario's »crossings« and »indigenous performative pragmatism (Blaser 2019: 90). If scientists are required to »educate themselves« and ideally repent before they are welcomed into such alliances, the chances of getting anywhere are very slim. But if the primary concern is not to make others admit their errors, but to build heterogeneous coalitions in support of »emplaced collectives under difficult circumstances« (Blaser 2019: 90) things look potentially different. As fellow travelers in heterogeneity, scientists might make available descriptions that testify to the difficulties those emplaced collectives face in very different vocabularies that are suited to traveling other routes.

I admit it is difficult to imagine earth systems science and political ontology as divergent partners in crime. But maybe it isn't totally impossible. It might just require some exercises in cosmopolitical yoga.

Notes

- 1 This is also why I have taken the liberty of referring to Dr. Blaser by first name.
- 2 This requires explanation given an unfortunate formulation. I wrote that »even if it is often true that the one-world world wins, as when Western medicine and colonial regimes run roughshod over acupuncture or Ayurvedic medicine, *this outcome is not given*. Ontological surprises can emerge from lateral alliances between Yolngu people and ecologists, science fiction writers and climate scientists, or between anthropologists and their diverse friends and interlocutors« (Jensen 2021: 74). Mario observes that there is a contradiction between this recognition of the one-world world and my general opposition to big picture arguments. He believes it would be better to take the latter seriously, but I hurry in the opposite direction. It would have been better to completely refrain from using the term, but minimally it should have been pluralized as in (most of) John Law's original text (see below): one-world *doctrines* or varied one-world *worlds*.
- 3 This creates *many-directional* openings and closures. Instead of the dualist alternative between a container/one-world world, on one side, and plural enactments, on the other—there are complex patterns of one-world worlds (some containers, some not) and plural (non-container) worlds. This is

a different image of *a world of many worlds* (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018) or a *world multiple* (Omura et al 2018).

- 4 In the later article, »Universal Science« is replaced with »the scientific method« (Blaser 2018: 71).
- 5 In full, the description is: »But then, in January 2013 and under public pressure, the ban was issued from the ministerial hierarchy« (Blaser 2016: 565).

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