

# Against the abstract critique. Rejoinder to Francisco Rüdiger

## *Contra a crítica abstrata. Tréplica a Francisco Rüdiger*

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### ABSTRACT

The text is a rejoinder to Francisco Rüdiger's critique of the paper "A crítica da crítica essencialista da cibercultura" (Lemos, 2015). It reaffirms the central argument that the problem of technology critique is an essentialist view of the technique, and discusses the 3 issues indicated in the reply: 1. lack of academic references, 2. performative contradiction, and 3. uncritical endorsement. The work reveals the fragility of Rüdiger's paper in not naming the interpretation errors of the main works used and in not being able to seriously analyze Latour's (2012) theoretical proposal, presented with a counterpoint to the essentialist view of technology. The text refuses the listed issues and affirms the abstract aspect of the reply.

**Keywords:** Rejoinder, technology, critique, essence, actor-network theory

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### RESUMO

O texto é uma tréplica à crítica de Francisco Rüdiger ao artigo "A crítica da crítica essencialista da cibercultura" (Lemos, 2015). Ele reafirma o argumento central de que o problema da crítica à tecnologia é uma visão essencialista da técnica. Discute-se os três problemas apontados na réplica: 1. carência de erudição, 2. contradição performativa e 3. endosso acrítico. O trabalho demonstra que o artigo de Rüdiger é frágil por não apontar equívocos na interpretação das principais obras utilizadas e por não conseguir analisar seriamente a proposta teórica de Latour (2012), apresentada com um contraponto à visão essencialista da tecnologia. O texto recusa os problemas elencados e afirma o caráter abstrato da réplica.

**Palavras-chave:** Tréplica, tecnologia, crítica, essência, teoria ator-rede

**WARNING/FORENOTE**

**I** RESPOND HERE TO the criticisms made by Francisco Rüdiger in his article “Against the abstract connectionism: a reply to André Lemos” (2015), regarding my text “A critique of the essentialist critique of cyberculture” (2015), both published in this journal. I write this response as a sign of respect to my colleague and to the readers. The aim of this text is not to convince my critic, but rather to clarify some misconceptions so that the readers can interpret them and make up their own minds.

The text begins talking of invalidation (the verb used in the Portuguese version is “atacar”, attack): “André Lemos has published an article in this journal in which he attempts to invalidate [...]” (Rüdiger, 2015: 127, emphasis added); and ends talking about *force* (the penultimate verb used): “Again it is time, where there is *force*, to actuate the critique.” (Ibid.: 140, emphasis added). I would like to clarify that I am not at war, I did not *attack*, but rather criticized (unless Rüdiger thinks that all criticism of criticism is an attack) a given position, and I do not intend to use *force* to support my arguments. The purpose of my response here is not intended to feed controversy<sup>1</sup>.

1. I would like to thank Leonardo Pastor and Mari Fiorelli for their revision and suggestions, and state that this text in its entirety is my own responsibility.

**REAFFIRMATION**

Directly after reading Rüdiger’s reply carefully, I reaffirm the thesis of my article: the weakness of the critique to technology, in general, and to cyberculture technologies, in particular, which is a position held by those who subscribe to an independent reality, endowed with an essence, while giving little attention to empirical evidence of social facts. It is my opinion that this critique only partially applies to the phenomenon, which is just as it deals with it autonomously, isolating it from the unpredictability of sociotechnical networks. The critique does not describe social life well and, therefore, is of little help regarding understanding contemporary communication problems.

Bringing up a thorough review of the critical perspective about technology is not the main interest, but rather to align it to Bruno Latour’s perspective, mainly in terms of what is presented in his book *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (hereafter referred to as ‘IME’) (Latour, 2012). Few know or have discussed this in the area of communication in Brazil. I believe, with arguments to back my assumptions throughout the text, that this is a more proper position to comprehensively discuss nowadays’ cyberculture phenomena than an abstract and substantive critique. One can agree or disagree with this position, but any serious critique of my text should point towards: 1. where, in the studies cited by me, I am incorrect; and 2. while seriously analyzing IME,

show how the text fails to understand contemporary technology. Rüdiger does neither of these things and produces a critique based on his desire to belittle my text and defend his own field of interest.

### CRITICISM OF THE CRITICISM

Rüdiger (2015) highlights three problems in my article: 1. *lack of academic references* (hereafter referred to as an issue with scholarship), 2. *performative contradiction* and 3. *uncritical endorsement*. I will try to clarify these three points, rejecting critiques 2 and 3 and partially accepting critique 1. In his words:

This article challenges this judgment, drawing attention to three types of issues. *The first is a lack of scholarship* and insufficiently deep and clear understanding regarding what is proper to critical reasoning. *The second is the author's performative contradiction*, which the questioning the critique uses the same line of thought as he opposes rather than the one he advocates. *The third is an uncritical endorsement* of a chain of ideas that, separated from the research practice that can develop from them, abstractly promote hyper-empiricism with little epistemic content. (Ibid.: 127, emphasis added)

#### **Lack of academic references**

Rüdiger accuses me of not being scholarly. I accept that criticism, but I do not believe it is important. It is curious that Rüdiger mentions this first issue in his article's abstract, but then the text does not return to this point. He does not develop the theme, nor does he make any arguments regarding the need to be scholarly. Related to this supposed problem, he will criticize my understanding surrounding *critical reason*, as I shall explain below in detail.

My article is certainly not scholarly, nor was it intended to be. One might even ask where the scholarly texts on the subject of communication in Brazil are. I have not done a great deal of reading in this area since I started as a teacher and researcher over 20 years ago. However, this does not mean that the articles in this area are not good. However, in what specific texts exist in the field of studies on cyberculture in the country, the more arid texts that are not innovative and have no impact are precisely those that are most scholarly and abstractly critical, only touching slightly on empirical research. We know the journals and events in the area, and avoided quoting them so we did not fan the flames of even more controversy.

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## Against the abstract critique. Rejoinder to Francisco Rüdiger

I enjoy scholarly texts, three in particular, that I read recently, taught me a lot: the trilogy *Spheres* by Peter Sloterdijk (2011). I am fond of philosophical digressions and historical details from multiple and varied sources, but, let us be reasonable, when it comes to my text, these are unfair and pretentious critiques. It is unfair because it is not possible to include this dimension in an article that is limited, in terms of scope, word count, on the author's intention. If it were a book, it might even be a fair criticism. It is pretentious, as Rüdiger is placing himself in the position of a scholar by pointing this out. This may be the case, but I have not read enough of him to affirm or disprove this point. What I can say here is that while he points to a lack of scholarship as a problem, he does not offer a text himself that can fit into this category. Nevertheless, his article does have its qualities, even without the scholarship and the numerous mistakes made in regards to the central theme in my piece.

Regarding scholarship, I recall hearing from a French professor, an expert on philosopher L. Wittgenstein and one of the most important from the contemporary era, that the Austrian decided not to study the classics in order to be a philosopher. He wanted to think and create his own philosophy (he was very rigorous and enthusiastic), he did not see the value in re-reading the classics and being in a scholarly culture. I wanted to use this example merely to point out that a lack of scholarship is not a defect. However, being scholarly might indeed be a great virtue. Wittgenstein wanted to think, not be a scholar. Rüdiger accuses me of not being sufficiently scholarly. I do not have a scholarly culture, and my path is breaking through educational limitations, coming from another area of knowledge. As was the case with Wittgenstein, I am a mechanical engineer and I speak based on what I know from my training (technique and technology).

Therefore, on this point, I partially agree with his criticism, because it was not my intention to write a scholarly text. However, it is unfair to identify this as a problem. I do not think that its quality would be necessarily linked to this dimension. It is not an exaggeration to say that my text is not greatly different from the quality of most of the texts written in good academic journals by my colleagues in the area. My text is not of greater nor worse quality compared to theirs. Therefore, on this point, I find his criticism empty, pretentious, unproductive and irrelevant to the matter at hand.

### **Performative contradiction**

Regarding this second issue, Rüdiger (2015: 133, emphasis added) states:

In the article, the intention is to assert the superiority of a sociological empiricism over the critique that is cunningly reduced to its reflective interface. The main argument against the confronted employee point of view is, however, paradoxically abstract and philosophical. Instead, by being possible, in subjecting the critique to analysis in terms of the actor-network scheme, as would be coherent, the worst methods of that first one are adopted to try to invalidate it. The result is a *performative contradiction, an attack on the critique by employing argumentative procedures that negatively characterize it*. It is said that the criticism of culture and philosophy of technology are essentialist, regardless of bias. However, the analytical principles of actor-network theory did not intervene in the analysis. The entire report is characterized by its more traditional philosophical standpoint, which becomes increasingly clear the further one reads the article.

I cannot accept this criticism for the simple reason that my field of study was the texts. I left evidence in the notes and citations throughout the article. My work has been included in some texts by authors who consider it important that we understand the essentialist critical view of technology. Therefore, I cannot accept the criticism of my article not presenting empirical evidence. My laboratory was the library, my time was spent analyzing the read and discussed texts, which allowed the empirical corpus to be accessed, contested and/or proven. It was not my intention to talk about theory or criticism as a whole. But rather to simply discuss some studies that directly affect the question of technology. Therefore, my text is neither abstract nor contradictory because it is based on a corpus of precise texts.

Clearly, the size of the article meant that I could not include all the details in each one of them. Is it Rüdiger's critique (as the critique that I am critiquing) that is abstract, simply for producing a poor actor-network piece: it was not because of the traces (the texts cited), it was because he did not show me where I was incorrect, and he did not use IME to show that the technique presented there was unsatisfactory. Instead, based on other texts, Rüdiger jumped out of my empirical corpus and fled, as a good (or bad) critic, from my laboratory. Moreover, his criticism comes from a misperception of the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), as I shall show below.

A good critical text should confront the empirical material, showing that what I claim is unfounded. However, this is not what Rüdiger does. He does not show, in specific texts that cite Heidegger, Ellul, Baudrillard, Virilio, Keen, Morozov or Lanier, exactly where it is that I neglect to point them out as essentialists. He recognizes this in Ellul and, with Heidegger, he calls for the joining of his philosophy, and not to the specific text on the issue of technolo-

gy (commenting, but showing no consistent refutations to my thesis). In some passages, regarding the Frankfurt School, he does not go deeper and refuses to make comments: “About the scarecrow of the early 1980s that he calls into question with the name of Frankfurt School, we believe any comment to be unnecessary” (Rüdiger, 2015: 134).

It is therefore paradoxical that he, as a proponent of *critical reason*, uses texts of authors to make a point beyond that which I have presented, therefore leaving it outside the scope of my article. Against the thesis of the cited authors (and not on the critical theory as a whole), Rüdiger does not present any empirical arguments based on the texts. Thus, what we end up with is an abstract critique. As a result, my article contains zero performative contradiction.

### Critical judgment

For Rüdiger, the third problem of the text “is its uncritical endorsement of a chain of ideas that, separated from the research practice that can develop from them, abstractly promote hyper-empiricism with little epistemic content” (2015: 127). The chain of ideas to which he refers is the ANT. On this point, it seems that the author was one of those who *did not read, or read it poorly, and, as they are talking a lot of about this now, are against it and do not like it*. This happened at some events in the area. As I am one of those who highlights the work of Latour these days, there is nothing more obvious than to attack me (although I am not alone in this, there are other noteworthy researchers at centers in Brazil researchers who are working in this direction).

As I pointed out in the text and at the beginning of this rejoinder, my intention was to use Latourian thought regarding technology and contrast it with the texts that I identify as critical essentialists. My intention was to make a critique of the essentialist critique of modern technology by pointing out the advantages of a Latourian stance, especially that as is presented in the IME. Thus, I could not criticize this theory, because my argument is, justly, a defense of their ideas.

That does not mean that I do not have any critiques to offer, it is more that there is a better time and place to present them. I have taught several courses at Brazilian universities on the subject, those who attended these courses know that I have criticisms and doubts. But this is not the place for such criticisms and doubts. For example, in my last book, I write about Heidegger and Latour, showing that Latour (who insists on criticizing Heidegger) actually adopts a Heideggerian position in many of his views on technology (Lemos, 2013). I have many doubts about the ANT and the IME, but I agree with their

positions concerning technology and analyzing society. I think that they can help us get out of the traps of an essentialist critique that is blind to social life.

A good critique compels us to rethink arguments, correct, improve and find new paths of research. I have self-criticized and am moved by knowledge, not by affiliations. My guides are not the instituted powers, but rather what I consider to be relevant theory. My intellectual journey shows that I am not afraid of change, I cannot help but recognize limits and change. Certainly, my critique could criticize the Latourian view of technology, approaching the cited texts with seriousness, demonstrating that this position would not be interesting for thought regarding the technology in cyberculture, or even that it would be harmful to critical thought. It does not do this. It is merely a simple-minded critique containing banal questions and more or less explicit debaucheries. Accusing me of blind adoption is frivolous, and calling Latour *my guru*, disrespectful.

Therefore, this is more a disproportionate accusation that is unfair and shows a poor understanding of my proposal. The third problem that Rüdiger states is therefore false. I would like to clarify one more time that the position I maintain is in defense of the view of technology presented by Latour in IME. Therefore, criticizing it would then indeed be a performative contradiction.

## GENERAL COMMENTS

I shall here clarify the criticisms dissolved over the three problems in order to indicate the major misunderstandings and differences between the two texts.

### **Attack on all critical history**

Rüdiger states: “the opponent of essentialism succumbs to another, in which the entire history of criticism is, by summary order, monochromatically reduced to a single and substantial principle” (2015: 132, emphasis added). I would like to reiterate that I did not *attack* all forms of critical thinking, which is even evident in the title of the article, my arguments and my footnotes. I did not make a critique against critical reasoning. He would have been correct if I had. I never intended to say that all the cited authors, or “*throughout the entire history of the criticism*”, they always develop the same criticism with no empirical foundation. Therefore, Rüdiger twists the words in my text in an attempt to strengthen his position. In addition to finding error regarding the scope of my critique, Rüdiger (2015), paradoxically, seems to even agree with my central argument. We can see this point in three passages:

According to Lemos, the sin of the critique, briefly, would reside in its empirical lacking; it would be in the fact that, with it, “we lose the possibility of describing the associations that empirically compose the social” (Ibid.: 30). *That this is the case most of the time, we do not question.* (Ibid.: 130, emphasis added)

The fact that the critical activity often understands itself poorly and goes beyond its limits, assuming a total, essentialist character, which deprives it of its very basis, is not discussed, we agree – but this is examined case by case, and not by indiscriminately lumping together a handful of very diverse thinkers and philosophers. (Rüdiger, 2015: 131, emphasis added)

Who knows if the separation, for technology, of an *essential and decisive space*, whose *axiological sign is negative applies to Ellul*, but is valid, let us say, for Adorno? Considering the references to the term in *Capital*, would it be valid for Marx to denounce his substantialist treatment? (Ibid.: 131-132, emphasis added)

Well, this is precisely the point: “*in most cases*”, the critique of technology “*takes a total essentialist slant*”. Thus, my argument is simple: the main critical texts regarding technology (one can argue and debate whether these really are the texts and authors, but Rüdiger does not do so, which seems that he accepts my empirical corpus), and that highlight cyberculture study, are essentialist and abstract, with little regard for experience. I investigated specific texts that resonate and help to create an essentialist critique of technology. As Rüdiger mistakenly states, I did not make a generalistic critique of critical reasoning as a whole, neither did I criticize these authors as a homogeneous block. Thus, his critique is not fairly related to my text and does not present evidence that might contradict its central thesis from the displayed empirical corpus.

In the last of the previously mentioned citations, it is interesting to point out how Rüdiger firstly agrees on the point of Ellul (which I quote more than once and which is part of my empirical corpus and the central discussion) and then, in an attempt to contradict my text, he looks to Adorno and Marx to support his position – well, I did not make many comments regarding Adorno (I only cited him on page 36) and Marx does not even superficially appear in my text because he does not show the differences or explain why they are not substantialists. Using the instruments that he accuses me of, he does not present arguments about Marx’s *Capital*, nor does he review the literature on Adorno to defend his point, but he quickly puts both to his side, implying that I was putting all their work in the same basket. This is not what I did.

Regarding Ellul, I wrote:

For Ellul, “the technologies from applied science date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and characterize our civilization. The new fact is that the multiplicity of technologies literally makes them change character; which no doubt come from ancient principles and seem like a result of normal evolution and logic; however, they do not constitute the same phenomenon anymore. *The technique effectively assumed a body of its own, becoming a reality by itself. It is no longer only a half and intermediary; but an actual object, an independent reality with which I have to rely on*” (1968: 65).

[...]

i.e. For Ellul: “Technology conditions and provokes social, political and economic change. It is an engine for everything else, despite appearances, despite man’s pride in his philosophical theories, they still have a decisive force whose political regimes are decisive in evolution. *They are no longer external requirements that determine technology, but rather their internal needs. It became a reality in itself, which is sufficient by itself, with its private laws and own regulations*” (1968: 135). (Lemos, 2015: 34, 36, emphasis added)

Quoting Heidegger, I wrote:

The Gestell makes this interpretation possible, it places man in a position to unveil reality as a fundamental method of “enframing”. As the one who is challenged forth in this way, man stands within the essential realm of Enframing. [...] *The essence of modern technology starts* man upon the way of that revealing through which the real everywhere, more or less distinctly, becomes standing-reserve (1958: 32-33). (Lemos, 2015: 33, emphasis added)

In the Ellul phrase I showed, by resuming the debate on the question of technique in Heidegger, the unmistakable character of technology that is independent of any social arrangement that comes and establishes itself. Everything is defined in an immutable essence, in a substance given once and for all. For Ellul, technological activity is “*an independent reality*”. Heidegger speaks of an “*essence of modern technology*”. I do not criticize all of their philosophy. I showed the evidence (my corpus of analysis). Thus, how would these authors not be, in relation to technology, in their most important texts on the (which were part of my empirical corpus) essentialist theme? I could even reevaluate my position if Rüdiger had presented evidence of my mistake in these texts. But he did not do so.

Regarding the Frankfortian critical theory, I will quickly return to the more generic critiques, because my goal was not to perform a thorough investigation, but rather to synthesize that for the whole of this school:

The mass media and modern technology dulls the spirits by capitalist logic, which reduces everything to instrumental rationality and industrial dynamics. The epicenter of this phenomenon is in the emergence of a close association between science and technology, between future and technological and instrumental rationality. Technology is associated with the repressive forces of instrumental reason, with the homogenizing market and the productivist logic of industry. Massification is therefore synonymous with a flattening beneath the quality of culture. Culture goes on to reproduce the industrial logic of production. (Lemos, 2015: 37)

What is wrong with in this statement? Would I be wrong to identify a substantialist perspective that does not see forms of appropriation and misappropriation? This said, I am not saying that all thinkers have an unequivocal position in all their texts, because this *School* brings together intellectuals with major conceptual and stylistic differences. What I wanted to highlight was simply the principle message regarding media technologies, to show how a critical essentialist view will manifest itself in several studies on the cyberculture technologies. Recognizing the importance of the critique and of the Frankfurt School, I wrote (Ibid.: 37), while not having seen any opposing arguments in the text about my critique:

This led to comprehensive, substantialist analyses that paid too little attention to the real challenges and associations involved in the mediations between media, technologies and culture. As a consequence, while ignoring the diversity of associations in their concrete dimensions that thusly led the Frankfurt critique, Heidegger's philosophy of disclosure and Ellul's total system to produce analyses were generalizing and important, but far too comprehensive, failing to descend to the level of phenomena and their networks. The substantialist, idealist and normative character thus makes technologies hostage either to communicative and substantive reason, or to instrumental and manipulative reason, given that there was no possibility of negotiating between these dimensions.

Therefore, Rüdiger cannot argue against the essentialist vision of technology in Heidegger, he agrees with me regarding Ellul, he does not defend or state where I am incorrect in the critique I make of Virilio, Baudrillard, Morozov, Keen or Lanier, and is limited by simply saying that he will not comment on

my critique (in reality those of many authors) on the Frankfurt School. But still, Rüdiger states that I have not read Adorno. I am not going to list my academic history here. I would only like to say that my master's thesis was Frankfurian, and that my doctorate, in another area of knowledge, was rightly given by my intuition that this theory would be unable to help us think about the challenges of digital culture and microcomputing in the early 1990s. This “*rebellion*” of young people (Breton, 1991) appropriating technology, inventing microcomputers and creating an open and civil internet seemed difficult to encapsulate in the view of modern technology held by this *school*. Despite not being an expert in Adorno, saying that I have never read it sounds flippant (because there is no way he could know) and shows no respect to my academic past.

In relation to other authors critiqued by me, I would like to emphasize that I was a student of Paul Virilio during a course at the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris, and I was in direct contact with Jean Baudrillard (who held a seminar on the *virtual* in the group that I created and coordinated – Groupe de Recherche sur la Technique et le Quotidien (Gretech), at CEAQ/Paris V, Sorbonne). We are aware of their positions regarding digital technologies. That does not mean that every piece of work produced by Virilio or Baudrillard contains a monotonic critique on technological society.

For example, in one of his classes, Virilio said things that demonstrate his rejection of technology (not having a TV, avoiding elevators...). He states that the “cyberworld” leads to a negative logic and policy (Virilio, 1996). Whereas for Baudrillard, the virtual and the various forms of electronic communication are tools of the hyperreality, “pure data computation”, instituting a “perfect crime” (Baudrillard, 1990). I am particularly fond of the critiques made by Morozov, but even he stated that, in order to be successful in academia circles, he decided to specialize in always (and only) pointing towards the evils of technology.

Again, I will not go into great detail regarding these authors, but we can state that their views are not open to the unpredictability of the sociotechnical networks. However, Rüdiger does not offer anything to defend them. My critic gave no argument that was supported with concrete examples from the texts that I cited, which are well known, read and easily accessible for use in a confrontation.

### **Misconceptions surrounding ANT and IME**

My text is 18 pages in length, when the abstract and conclusion are removed, nine of which are on the essentialist perspective of technology and

nine on IME. The weakest point of Rüdiger's critique is that he did not give much thought to the part which presents Latour's view of technology in IME. He incorporates texts on ANT, but avoids any serious discussion regarding IME; his writing is limited as it is quick to criticize or it creates irony, as can be seen in reference note 3 (Rüdiger, 2015: 136).

Rüdiger's text shows that he does not know, or does not understand Latour's arguments (or even those of Callon, Alckrich, Law, Harman) well, he mistakenly points out that the assumptions of ANT and IME (and thereby, mine) would be essentialist, abstract and substantialist. These are not the correct assumptions, since the entire work confronts what is generic, abstract and described without paying the price of empirically observable evidence. Rüdiger's superficial knowledge of ANT and IME (2015) means that he makes this mistake, which can be seen on page 134, in which he states that

based on the Latourian view that it implies, mediation means a "movement of composition of humans and non-humans, in which subject and object mutually compose themselves" (Lemos, 2015: 30). However, who does not see that this, as others will point out, is an essentially abstract and substantialist statement?

What I state regarding ANT, based on decades of research in several areas of knowledge, is that mediations are not, and cannot be, substantive and abstract. The work of the pioneers and the actual researchers focused on ANT is always looking for evidence, for the traces left and empirically demonstrated in the various analyzed associations. For Rüdiger, I fall into contradiction, because what I defend would be based on "an essentially abstract and substantialist statement". This is the point where his critique falls apart, because what he claims to be the largest contradiction in my text is based on him making an error in understanding. All the theoretical and methodological force of ANT is based on the opposite of the analyses that begin from essences or substances. Presenting my position in this way demonstrates that Rüdiger is completely unaware of what ANT and IME were.

I shall explain quickly, without having to go back over old ground (Lemos, 2013). For the ANT and the Modes of Existence (IME), everything is defined by the *be-as-other* relationship, in associations a priori that are always open and indefinable. The premise is this: follow the actors, bind yourself to the evidence, and myopically (not panoptically) look at the associations. There is nothing that, based on the texts of its principal authors, we can point to as statements of essence. The ANT looks to social life, the existence and action of agents (called actants and intermediates), while accepting the mutation, the

unpredictability, the opening, and is therefore against the explanations given beforehand, the generalist, essentialist and abstract criticism.

Thus, we can disagree with this theory, albeit not in this way, without thorough discussion and in a bias fashion. I am not saying that this thought is not problematic. Harman (2011) himself, who is complimentary of Latour's work, disagrees on this point, pointing out that there is an essence in the things that would allow us to define them in a fundamental dimension. However, he never says Latour's statements are essentialist or substantialist. I do not begin this discussion in my article. I simply mention the sociological interest (and communication) of observing associations, doing so without confining us to preconceived and essentialist views of technology in the analysis of contemporary media phenomena.

Regarding IME, it seems that my critic read the book hastily and incompletely. The book does not only incorporate many of the key themes from Latour's work, as it is anchored in a line that passes through James, Greimas, Whitehead, Souriau... The arguments used by Rüdiger, stating that ANT would be producing another metaphysic, show that he is not very familiar with the theory. ANT and IME propose a connection between empiricism and philosophy, or, as Latour calls it (Latour, 2005), a "philosophical anthropology" or "empirical philosophy". In none of these do they resemble an essentialist metaphysic. Rüdiger superficially says:

Desiring to shun substantialism in relation to the theme, one falls into its abstract and empty definition as a mode of existence that no one, except for the will of the creator of the idea, knows where it came from or what justifies it – as occurs in relation to other topics in the article under discussion (2015: 139)

An attentive reading of IME easily responds to this question. But I will leave this job of (re)reading to my critic. His questions are simply attempts to discredit them, without much care or attention, as can be seen in the following passage:

For example, at one point he states that technology "is the result of a movement that takes from the inert and living a moment of metamorphosis and reproduction and persists in the transformation" (Ibid.: 45). However, what kind of argument is this? How does he know all this? Is there something more here than an arbitrary definition? What justification could he have? Does he do well to defend the empiricism by renewing the speculative and abstract discourse? (Ibid.)

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The entire argument of IME is against speculative and abstract discourse. Not understanding that this is legitimate, but belittling it in this way does not help the debate. My argument was contextualized and an attentive reading of the text can explain that. I ask that the reader go back to the second part of the article, where I explain the modes of existence and Latour's view that, opposite to an essentialist perspective, I take as one option of thought for technology in cyberculture. I state:

In the essentialist view that defines the emergence of Homo Faber, Latour argues, technology disappears precisely in the appearance of its essence. Thus, considering the technique as a means to an ends is an unbecoming way of treating such important beings to constitute the subject and society. However, based on an essentialist philosophy that treats being-as-being (*être en tant qu'être*) rather than a being-as-other (*être en tant qu'autre*) that points to trajectories and movements, modernity produces more and more human and non-human hybrids while simultaneously eroding the reality of the beings of technology. The result is a wide-ranging modern movement of concealing technology and scorning objects, formed by the essentialist critics from the emergence of the modern matrix of reason with the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, passing through Heidegger, Ellul and their contemporaries, as we have seen. However, as Latour explains: "The scorn with which people view technologies comes from the fact that they are treated according to the same model that we saw used to misunderstand the work of reference. Just as there was, in epistemology, a theory of objectivity as "correspondence" between map and territory, there is in technology a theory of effectiveness as correspondence between form and function. Technology is believed to be an action stemming from a human being – most often male – who would then bear "on" a matter itself conceived through confusion between geometry and persistence [REP - REF]. Technology then becomes an application of a conception of science that is itself erroneous [...] But it is not technology that is empty, it is the gaze of the philosophy of being-as-being, which has deliberately emptied itself of all contact with its own experience. In the finest dam, this philosophy does not manage to see anything original with regards to Being. 'Simple beings', as Heidegger would say [...]" (Ibid.: 227). (Lemos, 2015: 43)

Every interest in adopting this epistemological stance is based on removing the substances, frames, the *a priori*, to look at and describe social life, while following the actors and showing their traces. They see that this is not a simple task, since this description is always open to confrontation from other good descriptions. Rüdiger (2015: 132) himself seems to recognize this in re-

lation to Latour's first works (citing *Aramis*, *Laboratory Life* and *Pasteurization of France*), but debunks the latest, regarded as "metaphysical treatises, very badly disguised as theoretical and epistemological reflection (Latour, 2012, 2013)" (Ibid.). He once again fails to demonstrate his impressions, only throws them to the reader as an act of faith.

His misunderstanding and defense of substances and essences will even vindicate hermeneutics and language with past instances, where ANT rightly aims to precisely deinflect them as a problem. He does not understand that the definition, in each association, prevents a substantive or essentialist view of technology, and that everything is irreducible and a translation (read about this in Latour's work on "irreducibility" in the *Pasteurization of France*). As regards sociotechnical networks and essences, Rüdiger writes:

"Sociotechnical networks are ways of describing the sheer diversity of the physical devices available to us in any given situation" (Lemos, 2015: 41). On another point, to quote the words of Latour: "Technologies have meanings, but they produce such meanings through a special means of articulation that crosses the boundaries of common sense between signs and things" (Ibid.: 44). What statute do these statements have if not essentialist?

[...] the author argues against the essentialism from critics, accusing them of promoting a "gross simplification of reality", without noticing that, in this way, he not only claims the privilege of having access to it, but also assumes the position of a universal demiurge, who already knows what it is beforehand, defining it as "a set that is stabilized based on mediation, translation, network, black box, delegation, inscription, deviation" (Ibid.: 42). (2015: 140)

Here we can see a semantic confusion, which prevents us from getting a glimpse of what is actually at stake. Far from the essentialist critical pretention of technology defining reality beforehand, ANT proposes an opening and blurring. There is no privilege regarding what this reality is, since everything is moving and stabilizing without substance or essences to define *a priori*. The same can be said of *The Question Concerning Technology*. There is no affirmation here of what the reality is or the truth of its access. There is always this construction present while constructing the traces, at each moment.

While defending the essences in a veiled manner, Rüdiger warns: "Nothing else escapes the sociotechnical networks, since nobody knows anymore what would not be an actant. Instead of essences, it is affirmed that there are only hybrids 41)" (2015: 140). This is the point where we disagree. I believe

that this position is more interesting and effective to understand cyberculture than a thought that denies sociotechnical networks and hybrids. Nothing *is* an actant in a substantive sense, so that it is impossible to know what it would not be, since everything can be a mediator. Or could Rüdiger define, by an essence, something that cannot mediate or translate others? It is difficult to sustain this position while looking at the various associations. As a consequence, everything may effectively turn out to be an actant, but not in substance.

Thinking about networks, we can describe the actions of mediators (which produce difference) and intermediaries, without beforehand allocating an essence or substance to what it wants to be. I believe that this exercise is more interesting for discussing digital technologies than denying that one thing can mediate another, that this mediation can take various directions, and that the hybrids do not exist, with them being purified into generalizing and abstract separations. Maps should and can be challenged, but never in the name of immutable essences or substances.

When saying that the real sociotechnical networks comprise the real with human and non-human hybrids, the intention is not to define reality, the human and the nonhuman in advance and once and for all. Very much on the contrary. Everything will be defined in the associations and descriptions. But this unpredictability seems unsupportable for the essentialist critics, which is the source of Rüdiger's misconception when discussing the human and non-human. His questioning in the examples on page 135 explains his mistaken view regarding ANT and IME. He reasonably claims that what is human is controversial and fallacious. But this is exactly what I would say about ANT. However, my colleague made a mistake when stating that TAR would negate this controversy.

What is human, non-human or reality is not defined in advance, but it does say there are only hybrids. Rüdiger can only follow the network, pointing and criticizing the associations based on the description of their traces, while constituting himself as an actant, since he participates in the construction of the controversy himself. This movement of description and discussion continues until it is temporarily resolved and stabilized. If he had carefully read the founding texts of ANT and IME, Rüdiger would never have made this clumsy statement.

By using his example, we can perform an analysis using ANT with Nazism, showing that it was a specific type of relationship between humans and non-humans. The definition is not given beforehand by the analyst, but rather in the descriptions. In Nazism, the macabre ideology divided the world between the Aryans, considered to be *pure humans*, and the others, including

the Jews, considered to be *unclean, non-humans*. The analyst describes how this structure is configured, pointing out how these qualities (humans and non-humans) were presented. But always with a look at the traces, never from the essences about what one is to the other. The solution was given by the stabilization of the problem: the fall of the Nazism and the denunciation of its socially dysfunctional vision, which created an ethnic relationship divided by superiority and inferiority. If the Nazis had won, we might be talking here about another human definition. There are still neo-Nazi movements around the world. However, no discourse is strong enough to recognize them as legitimate in a broad and legal way. An actor-network analysis would only describe the network, pointing to the forms of its constitution: Nazism was precisely a hybrid network in which humans and non-human related with each other in a specific way.

The researcher is part of a network that describes and, in the description, proposes forms of evaluation. For ANT this is not a problem, as the construction of the social fact is explicit. Everything is built, “installed” (Latour, 2012), and the valid argument will be that which is established during the confrontation with the others. Going back to the Nazis, the laws and constitutions of all countries recognize (to the accuracy of the letter) that there is no difference between races. The statement that “there is no master race” was historically established with a lot of struggle. But nothing is guaranteed forever. The whole lesson from ANT to the essentialist critics is that the work continues! Having an established external evaluation criteria *a priori* does not recognize the dynamics of the associations nor does it help in the recognition of the social fact. The problem is not reaching the criteria, but rather recognizing that they cannot be given in advance and, once they are data, they have worth forever. The essentialist perspective makes the analyst blind to associations that could, in the future, bring it down. There cannot be criteria in advance, as there is a risk of skewing the description of the associations.

Rüdiger tries to find a criterion that is over quickly, and once and for all, with this *errant empiricism* which, however, for the ANT, is precisely what constitutes the unpredictable social reality. See how he puts it:

However, In the case there is the recollection that traces and associations are, in principle, open to endless description, which can still be determined at every moment. From which arises not only the problem of knowing which criteria one can use to assess the property and relevance of those that are identified but, especially, why one should prefer this errant and unlimited empiricism instead of a hermeneutic that is able to lead the experiments and materials under analysis to

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dialogue with a broader and more meaningful reflection theme, *according to the researcher's point of view*. (Rüdiger, 2015: 136, emphasis added)

As I suggested (Lemos, 2013), ANT is a *sociology of mobility*, for refuting criteria beforehand, denouncing the ineffectiveness of trapped visions to the theoretical frames and crude generalizations. Alternatively, he attempts the difficult exercise of describing the associations in their free and unpredictable movements. Rüdiger wants precisely the essence, an external verification criteria that can be applied to phenomena. It is possible to even accept dissent and criticize the view of the ANT. But this is precisely my point. I believe that, against the essentialist view of technology, in order to understand it and politicize it, we should be open to “this errant and unlimited empiricism”. In my opinion, this position is more interesting than appealing the associations to an external criterion.

This is what happens with essentialist critics who take technologies as one thing or another in advance without carefully looking for associations in errant movements. I quoted several texts of thinkers who, in my view, have done this. For this reason, the essentialist critique of technical failure. Some say that the internet is the new area of capital and the rationalization of existence. Others say the internet emancipates humanity and leverages its collective and connective intelligence. This is correct in some cases, incorrect in others. Can we generalize this for all forms of use and network? Would there be an essence of the internet, or of modern communication and information technologies, which would enable us once and for all to understand and predict the vector of their associations? If it were, it would be so good, comfortable and practical! What can we say about Twitter, Facebook or even the Internet? Is it possible to talk about the internet as a whole? What would the internet really be, as a totality? Due to it being the result of modern science and military and economic power, could we, in order to perform the critique, unequivocally point out their substances and the sense of the actions it is linked to? Clearly, we could not. Only one abstract, pretentious and even fallacious thought would recognize this. ANT proposes to avoid great leaps, to stick to the irreducibility of the association concerned, develop a look back at associations in a given time. Would this not be a more interesting position to think about the associations involve Twitter, Facebook or other expressions of internet and cyberculture?

We have to deal with this unbearable “errant empiricism” under pain of distorting the vector of actions, because everything is irreducible and can change. For example, social networks can be tools to help make political revolutions in an instant, but they are simply ways to empty relationships in another

er. The intention is to show how the networks are formed in certain situations and affirm that this, unfortunately, is all we can say. Jumping to major generalizations (based on essence or substance) gives the impression of a scathing critique, with the authority to be able to talk about something with completed knowledge, when in reality, the only thing produced is an abstraction of phenomena, errors and distortion of associations. As Latour would say on IME, the essentialist critic would be a hostage of the *Double Click*, this demon that jumps over everything and does not pay the price of the connections of performed fact.

Regarding the role that social networks had in the uprisings that became known as the Arab Spring, Rüdiger (2015: 136) states:

however, it is fitting to ask, if not just them, but everything that can be cited regarding the case – cars, clothes, watches, water bottles, etc. –, do not have the same role either, that is, as actants, translators and mediators in any other event at their time Is it not clear that it is the same mode in each case, meaning that they always matter and should be tracked, or is it decided amidst open reflection about their influence on the event, the relevance that attributed to them the subjects and the objectives and study questions of the researcher?

By thinking of essences, Rüdiger does not understand that the role of actant is assumed by humans and non-humans according to what presents itself in a particular association, or that this is temporary. There is a lot of unpredictability for a decisive reason and accepted critique. Things (humans included) may exercise one or another function depending on the connection, how they connect and what other things are involved in this particular and irreducible specific form of connection. And the descriptions will depend on the analysts who establish the social fact. For this specific event (the Arab Spring), certain factors were not decisive, and therefore were not actants. For example, if Rüdiger had shown that *bottles of water* were important in the uprising, we must redo the map of the mediations and include them. The price must be paid and the traces must be shown. This is what he does not do.

However, taking a different route, Rüdiger must be right, since the bottles of water were probably important during the uprisings. The protests could not have been held without water. The point is to present the traces, to build the network in a suitable preposition. The mistake here is not showing the traces and not understanding the preposition. If the “world is articulated” as Latour puts it, any mediator, either a smartphone or a handwritten poster, is inserted into this tangle of networks called the Arab Spring. The important difference,

and one that Rüdiger does not cover, since he does not demonstrate an understanding of the network concept, is precisely what goes beyond him: the preposition.

Latour describes this mode, or “meta-language of the survey” well in IME. Understanding the appropriate connections guide research in order to highlight important mediators for investigation. It is not enough to set up the network, a suitable *preposition* must be indicated. Water consumption may not have been an important factor for researchers wishing to understand the social movement during the uprisings. But, on the other hand, this information might be of interest to a health researcher. Rüdiger’s error is his questioning of inserting bottled water into a network that is actually guided by a preposition that identifies the particularities of communicational processes. What remains of Rüdiger’s critique at this point, and his reply as a whole, is that he makes a shallow analysis of what ANT itself has already surpassed: how far can the network be seen, which might include an actant or not? IME goes beyond ANT with the idea of preposition, however Rüdiger does not understand this point.

I insist that the *truth* of the arguments, or their objectivity, is not defined by substantive criteria, but by the confrontation of the traces and the descriptions of the networks and the prepositions. In my report, I identified (based on surveys that mention in my text) some things such as actants to these uprisings, I was worried about using the communicational processes involved with the use of social networks. I cited authors who showed how Twitter, Youtube and Facebook were important. But they will not always be. However, in fact, other good descriptions can reveal new ones. Objectivity will not be built by my view of the facts, but by the clash between different views based on observable traces and prepositions.

The essentialist critique is closed to the social world. Curiously, even with these traces singled out by many analysts, many critics (pessimists) were silenced regarding the role of social media in these uprisings. The problem is not so much regarding being optimistic or pessimistic, but thinking in terms of essences or substances, closing the associations in question. From an essentialist view, the pessimists believe it is difficult to recognize the revolutionary and emancipatory use of social networks. For optimists, from the opposite point of view: it is hard to accept using them in stupid, totalitarian and limited way. As regards the Arab Spring, the silence of the pessimistic critics showed the frailty and weakness of their positions. By their being in an ideal world (more comfortable than dealing with the unpredictability of connections), these critics could not, at that or at any other time, point to the emancipatory

role of these social media. Doing so would surely would betray their views and positions about them.

It cannot be said, as I stated in my article, that these tools are revolutionary, or that they never serve this cause. In fact, my text (regarding the Arab Spring) was fairly written after having read misguided reports about some *pessimists* and *optimists* stating: “Twitter made the revolution”, or “humans are the ones making the revolution”. I was motivated by this double essentialist error that does not help us understand the socio-communicational dynamics in action in the observed phenomenon. This is the critique of the essentialist critique of technology. It skews, based on the essence, to the analysis of social facts that it is directly connected. This is why a view of technology close to defending Latour in the ANT and the IME would be more interesting when considering about. This is what I intended to say.

## TO DIALOGUE

The most interesting part of Francisco Rüdiger’s reply is that he seems to think that the arguments in my article are consistent, even appearing to agree with them. He ends up writing a reply which acts as proof of my central argument: a critique by a critic, without empiricism, erasing the mediations due to a larger essence, thus proving the inefficiency of the essentialist stance. Your text is very well written and it takes a careful reader not to fall into your traps. Seduction is always a diversion, and essentialist critics are always very seductive!

His argument fails by not being able to point out, in the texts and authors with whom I worked, the mistakes of my arguments. Instead, he seeks to find internal inconsistencies by stating that my statements are, as is true for the entirety of ANT and IME, based on essentialist or substantialist premises. As I have previously shown, the supposed inconsistencies identified in the text are the result of their misguided understanding of ANT and IME. Because of this, the supporting base of his criticism falls down.

Responding to three main points of the critique, I state that: 1. I recognize my lack of scholarship, but this is an unfair and pretentious criticism; 2. there is no performative inconsistency, since my empirical corpus was composed of texts, with the traces shown, where I claim there is an essentialist critique of technology; and 3. it is not about having a critical view of IME, but precisely to defend it and oppose the critical perspective. This, after reading and analyzing Rüdiger’s article, I conclude that his critique is abstract in relation to the central arguments presented in my text, and that he constantly tries to point

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out inconsistencies - which only served to reveal his own lack of knowledge of ANT and IME.

I believe I could have been more helpful to readers if Rüdiger had done the following: 1. a critique of my vision of the authors cited in specific texts; and 2. a serious challenge of Latour's vision in IME regarding technology. Rüdiger did neither of the above except to accuse me of generalizing the essentialist perspective technique to the theory or critical reason, while using other texts not included in my empirical corpus. Without making any explicit assumption, he even seems to accept my thesis, because his argument is not to deny the critique, but more to say that I too am essentialist and abstract. I have presented arguments showing that his position is one of misunderstanding. His reply is limited as it is unable to show the alleged falsity of my argument (the critique is not essentialist), nor can he show that Latour's view of technology is incorrect (which is what would lead me to think that he agrees with it).

His article seems emotional in nature as a critical threat to his position (and rightfully so he will include force at the end of his text), instead of a textual example of critical reason. A more rational and less passionate article would help us more than this critique to my limited abstract article. The tone that is sometimes rude and aggressive (a small compliment to my person the first few paragraphs gives him license for the forthcoming attack) helps little. I know the limits of my text and recognizing them is an effective way to avoid pride, conceit and arrogance that a supposed place at the academy (the French debate) would permit. Elegance is something we must cultivate beyond the permissivity of each field. Critiques are part of the game. I take them gracefully, with no problems I try to learn from them when they are fair (by fair I understand those that are within the proposal of the text, the conference, the lesson, and the research project...).

I wanted to point out the essentialist view of technology held by some thinkers in very precise texts, while offering, as a counterpoint, the Latourian perspective on the topic, which in my opinion is very well presented in Latour's latest book (IME). I did not see any serious critiques or counterpoints to the view of technology as it is presented in the IME, or those that I set out in the article. I would like to reiterate the argument that the problem of the critique of technology is an essentialist vision of the technique that prevents you from seeing the world of life, sociotechnical networks in formation. Thus, Morozov, Keen, Heidegger, Ellul, Virilio and Baudrillard were only partially correct.

My text is not about an *abstract connectionism* (as Rüdiger accuses), but completely the contrary, covering, as set out in the abstract (Lemos, 2015: 29): "a focused view, attached to the constituent networks of the technical phe-

nomenon and true to social associations, may offer a solution to the empirical failure of the critique”. I criticize the essentialist critique of technology precisely to go against the jump on the phenomena and generalizing abstractions. Thus, my conclusion stands (Ibid.: 48):

Exercising this generic criticism is concealing technology and, at the same time, making the analysis of the networks impossible. Technology, as we have seen (whether as a measuring instrument, a transformation tool, a set to an industrial machine, or a communication media), is joined together in the folds and couplings, associations, and this must be seen through its action (which may be negative and positive in certain circumstances). In terms of digital culture, we need to understand that action through the use of communication and information technologies, however simply they may be, associating multiple actors in a circulation of mediations and delegations traversing spaces and contexts: engineers, creators, producers of information, companies, distributors, users, laws, software and databases, servers, networks... Comprehending digital culture entails understanding the relations between these diverse actors and their forms of folding and coupling through good descriptions and analyses of their traces. The essence that conceals provides little help in describing the social. [...] The critiques of new technologies are generally poorly constructed because they insist on essentialist perspective of the technical phenomenon. By appealing to essence, we hide the beings of technology, we lose sight of the associations and produce rapid leaps between domains which are apparently separate but which are always, in fact, connected and hybrid. Moving beyond the essentialist critique, the ANT proposes to open up networks and discern a third possibility that escapes sociodeterminism or technodeterminism, bringing responsibilities for everyone, both human and nonhuman

It would be good to hear Rüdiger talk about what he, as a critic, has to say about the limits of his own activity in the midst of the current cybercultural developments, in addition to the limits and potentialities of Latour’s view on the phenomenon. Rüdiger, with his intelligence, loses because he does not offer an interesting argument on these two points to the area. The point of this suggestion is so he can produce a propositive text on his position regarding the critique of technology in cyberculture, its advantages and problems, as well as on the limits of the ANT and the IME in regards to technology. Thus, we could think about the problems and controversies that surround cyberculture and, who knows, discuss it.

I appreciate the effort made in the critique of my article, and I write this rejoinder as a sign of respect to my critic and my readers. But I refuse to con-

tinue the controversy that surrounds these texts. I do not assume to have convinced my colleague, but I hope that I have been able to clarify some points. 

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