How to Better Sense What is Happening?

A Political Lesson from Taste and Tasting

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> What really exists is not things made, but things in the making.
> —William James, A Pluralistic Universe, 1909

1. WHAT DOES TASTE HAVE TO DO WITH POLITICS?

To me, there is great interest in the intriguing expression "sensing collectives." At first, it is a suggestion to investigate any kind of groupings that are sensing around, that are feeling beings, things or events, or even that are sniffing out opportunities—those collectives including various people but also devices, organizations, procedures, etc. (Callon, Law, 1982; Law, Hassard, 1999). But "sensing collectives" may also read in the other sense as an endeavor to make ourselves capable of sensing our own heterogenous collectives (Voß, Guggenheim, 2019; Voß et al., 2018; Teil, 2004; Teil, Hennion et al., 2013), of approaching them through our senses. Finally, I also convincingly endorse that catchphrase for another reason, namely because it points out not at an object but at an on-going process—as does my use of the gerund tasting rather than taste in the title of this chapter. It is precisely the angle of attack I had adopted to investigate "tasting amateurs" (or fans, enthusiasts, and so on), as drawing up an uncertain and reflexive activity (Hennion, 2007), that requires training and devices, for an always uncertain result. By that, I don't mean a quest for some unreachable object, as aesthetics complacently tends to put it, but rather a minute collective and corporal work in order to make the object of taste "exist more," as Souriau beautifully put it (Souriau, 1956; see Latour, 2014).

If one considers all objects as being open, unachieved, "in process of making" (James, 1909b), all still to be made by relying on a heterogenous assemblage of bodies, collectives, devices, and things, then the relationships between esthetics and politics get crucial indeed, especially in that if forces social sciences—or cultural studies,

or empirical philosophy—to better catch how objects enter the game. This is what this chapter will try to clarify, from the lessons given by taste and tasting. It is true that in inquiring such an open, self-producing and often polemical process, I had for my part put the stress on esthetics, corporality, and sensuality, not on politics or social protests. Even if tastes are harshly debated, the frequent use of a revolutionary vocabulary by amateurs and critics does not cost much to the fiercest opponents. More crucially, in the case of tastes, options do not exclude each other. Ignoring the other is always possible; pluralism and non-exclusive fanaticisms are the rule, not the exception. One can dream of a similar picture of politics, except that if it were the case there would be no politics but endless debates and no decisions.

The problem here may be that such great categories as esthetics and politics—or science and technology—are too big to fail. Or rather they are giants with feet of clay. Their solemn obviousness may be a blinding clarity, creating too sharp partitions. If one gets down closer to situations and people, in any of those activities one just sees variously committed members, more or less reliable organizations, trained bodies and unequal competencies, all that framed through rough records or minute reporting, depending on tinkered-with equipment or on more or less sophisticated devices, and so on. But all this is brought together *for something*. What does such a commonplace imply? What if, instead of taking it for granted, we also take the object of any activity as being uncertain, open, still to be made? To say it pompously, what if those gradually shaping, fragile stakes of the activity are themselves neither predetermined nor a remote ideal, but self-defined through their own process of instauration? The big names above only pick the bet after the play.

This is precisely what referring to amateurs may help grasp. Both wordings "sensing collectives" and "tasting amateurs" stress the importance of feelings and sensations and aim at investigating them empirically; both point at collectives, devices, organization, procedures; but the main difference between lies in the focus the latter invites us to put on that common thing which matter so much to amateurs, the object of their passion. The word object itself comprises all the ambiguity at play, as its meaning ranges from a target of any human action (an *objective* to be achieved), making it a quasi-synonymous of issue, or concern, to being on the contrary a quasi-synonymous of thing, in its unhuman *objectivity*. Indeed, the same ambivalence about "object" is true about the word "sense." Its incredible polysemy, ranging from signification or meaning to naming our five organs of perception, has long since been pointed out. To me, it provides a good line to catch the "sensing collectives" project here: to make sense isn't merely a matter of signs. Reciprocally, it also questions how things signal us ("*faire signe*," as French puts it), as much as we target them. Sensing is a way of connecting those two crucial issues, the status of things in social research and a material and sensual approach to meaning, taken as a matter of bodies, of feelings, of collectives and of devices, including signs themselves. Thus posed, the question is less to articulate esthetics and politics than

to better catch their intertwined instauration, before or under any ready-made institutionalization.

To address this, drawing on my past work on music (Hennion, 2015), amateurs (Hennion, 2001) and attachments (Gomart, Hennion, 1999; Hennion, 2017), I will emphasize one specific issue: What kind of reset did social research have to implement in its genes to make itself both more hospitable for objects and, let's say, more sensitive to senses? In a kind of backward rewriting of the story, I will trace back the relationship between sense and things in the French social sciences, from the more abstract and symbolic understanding of the expression "to make sense" by semiology—the science of signs—to the more material and bodily one, to which opens the present project. I do not focus on the French side of the tale only because I am French but because from Durkheim's positive understanding of "the social" as an ignored reality hidden behind natural things to the long structuralist passage from the 1950s to the 1970s that radicalized a purely symbolic understanding of culture, and eventually the negative rewriting of both as a process of denial in Bourdieu's critical sociology, French social scientists of the 20th century had a heavy responsibility in widening the Great Divide between Nature and Culture. It is not by chance that authors who did not follow this wide avenue and fought against the Great Divide, as ANT founders and notably Stengers and Latour, were deeply influenced by American pragmatists or by Whitehead, beside some original French strong personalities as Souriau, Deleuze or Serres—the author of "*Les cinq sens*."

First, I will thus review the relationships between semiology, social sciences and pragmatism, with regard to one crucial issue: the place they give to objects. For my part, after having worked on music and mediation, I undertook to elaborate what I called a pragmatics of taste (Hennion, 2004; 2020), that I will present before developing what it may imply for politics—more specifically I make a wager: Research on taste and tasting/testing are well placed to advance the question of how we collectively sense things that are not yet clearly defined.

2. SOCIAL SCIENCES STRUGGLING WITH TASTE

2.1 Let objects speak! (completing semiology with Actor-Network Theory)

I start from a criticism of the way social sciences deal with taste. One reason for this is that I belong to the *Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation de l'École des Mines de Paris*. This research center is the place where the "sociology of translation" was created, which aimed to revise the sociology of science and technology in depth (see founding texts reprinted in Akrich, Callon, Latour eds., 2006). It was the way its French founders had called this approach, then re-labeled Actor-Network Theory, following

the fruitful collaboration with John Law—in French, la "*théorie de l'acteur-réseau*." Under the acronym ANT, it spread like wildfire throughout the Anglo-American world from the 1980s onwards.

Critical of some basic postulates made by sociology, this theory has from its beginnings relied very directly on borrowings from semiology: some quite explicit concepts, as *actants* or *débrayage/embrayage* (disengagement/engagement) taken from Greimas (Greimas, Courtès, 1982), or Latour's first article written in collaboration with semiologist Paolo Fabbri, published at the time in Bourdieu's review *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* (Latour, Fabbri, 1979); but also, more broadly, the central role given by ANT to the spokesperson as well as to the very notion of translation; all that, later on, has finally brought some of the center's researchers, including myself, closer to pragmatism.

On this last point, through our debates with other centers interested in the pragmatic approach, such as the *Centre d'études de mouvements sociaux* (CEMS) and the *Groupe de sociologie politique et morale* (GSPM), we were certainly more concerned with re-reading Dewey on public debate and inquiry theory (Dewey, 1927; 1938), and also, at least in our case, James's views on ontological pluralism and radical empiricism (James, 1909a; 1912). But Peirce's semiology was very much present too, in the background, through his radical rejection of the dualism between signs and things: The idea that things themselves are signs for an interpreter and that the roles between these three terms are not predetermined seemed to us to be tailor-made for our project.

But there are two ways of reading this initial proximity between semiology and ANT, with regard to reconceptualizing the subject-object relationship. The stumbling block, and this is the problem around which I will focus this intervention, is the status given to things. Is it a question of integrating other objects into semiology, in order to place more and more of them under the banner of "everything is language"? Or, conversely, is it to take semiology out of the world of signs while recovering the tools it has forged, in order to endow the objects themselves with a capacity to propose, address, and call: in short, to give them a voice? Was ANT a generalized semiology, or a completion of semiology, in every sense of the word completion—both a prolongation and an end? Since aesthetics is about taste, and taste is about a relation of things with humans, I recall the development of ANT as an approach radically rejecting any dualism of nature and culture or of things and signs. This excursion lead to re-appreciate taste as a process, a happening, which hopefully may help us discuss its relation with politics in new ways.

With hindsight, even if, as good Frenchmen fighting against the structuralism in which we had been immersed since childhood, we were no doubt simplifying and reinterpreting the pragmatists' theses abundantly for the needs of the cause, it still seems to me indisputable that there already were many points in common between our program and pragmatist and semiotic approaches, particularly in the way they

treat the subject-object relationship in direct opposition to those of classical or critical philosophies.

2.2 Let tasters listen to and interact with speaking objects! (completing Actor-Network Theory with pragmatism)

Following this, I will get to the ways by which I developed a pragmatics of taste, closely linked to and embedded with how ANT reconceptualized objects as alive and speaking, rather than deadly passive and mute. The core is to develop a new understanding of the ways human relate to objects as alive and speaking. The key is that this is where taste emerges as what happens when humans engage attentively, reflexively, and experimentally with live objects—appreciating them as being alive and speaking: listening to them, playing with them, provoking them.

It is worth mentioning here that the main idea of this approach met fiercer resistance from sociologists than it did from an audience of semiologists or pragmatist philosophers: The former are so obsessed by the need to show that taste is socially determined—a reality that in fact nobody disputes—that the slightest effort to take seriously both the properties and reactions of the objects tasted and the skills and practices of the tasters makes them stiffen up and pull out the heavy artillery.

3. THE GREAT DIVIDE

Let us first look at semiology, sociology, and the theories of taste as disciplines. This makes the gaps between them widen. As soon as the theories are established, they harden, while investigations in the field force them to compose. I do not pretend here to retrace their history, but only to note selectively their relationship to taste (by which I mean both the things tasted and the taste for them). Until the 1970s, from Saussure to Durkheim, from Lévi-Strauss to Lacan, from Foucault to Bourdieu, sign and symbolism reigned supreme over the French university. The most opposed theories agree on the basic postulate, the Great Divide between nature and culture, physical objects and social realities (Latour, 1983, 2005; Descola, 2013). Dualism always leads to quarrels between doubles: Conversely, on the side of the natural sciences, the refusal of their human colleagues to accept that things intervene in their analyses opens the way to an inverse and symmetrical dualistic reduction—no longer going from things to the meaning that one projects on them, but from the meaning to the matter.

France in particular has given in to the irresistible seduction of "everything is language" to which I alluded. Proud heirs of the founding principle of structuralism, semiotics, and semiology have been enthroned under various banners as absolute kings of the social sciences for more than half a century. Paradoxically, such

a sociological reductionism has left the field wide open for the "hard" sciences on taste to extend their empire and build a systematic metrology of taste, whether on the object side by measuring the components of tasty products or on the subject side by mapping our physiological and neurological sensors. This was only the shepherd's answer to the shepherdess: to the arrogance of social sciences, echoed the slow and meticulous extension of the domain of positivism.

But the story doesn't end there. If, on the contrary, Bourdieu radicalizes the great dualistic odyssey by adding to it the necessity of criticism and the idea that social domination is essentially achieved through its own denial (Bourdieu, 1987), the relationship to things becomes even more tense: From the "reification" of the Marxists to the "naturalization" of sociologists, it is then no worse crime than taking things for granted. In sociology in particular, a formidable machine for sucking up all objects has been set up. Even today in France, the apprentice sociologist trembles at the mere idea that he may be suspected of having "naturalized" his object, of having taken our "social constructions" for the reality of things. How, then, on the basis of such premises, could the young researcher sharpen his sensitivity to perceiving what things propose? Why would s/he really pay attention to what amateurs tell her/him, when deep down, s/he thinks they believe that the moon is made of green cheese, taking the game of social differentiation for the beauty of things and the refinement of tastes?

It was by drawing on other disciplines, themselves heavily influenced by semiology, that I then found tools for better thinking about objects in continuity with their meaning, for example in Michel de Certeau's work on the writing of history (de Certeau, 1988), or in Louis Marin's one on mediators in the art of the Quattrocento (Marin, 1989). After sensitizing us for the challenges of knowing taste I will end with a discussion of what this means for relating esthetics and politics and studying their intertwining in practice.

4. WHAT IF THINGS WERE NOT SO PASSIVE?

This is the first point that I would like to establish here. If there is so much blindness in matters of taste, it is in no way due to the social character of the construction of taste and its objects, which every amateur recognizes as soon as she describes her path. On the contrary, it is on the side of the social sciences themselves and the binary definition in which they have locked themselves. More precisely, they are the ones who have taken things for things—that is to say, in their eyes, inert objects, without capacity, good to be left to the microscopes of the "natural" sciences. Nothing could have prepared the French social sciences less to recognize pragmata, those "things in the making" (James, 1909a), "in their plurality," as William James also put it (James, 1909b, p. 210). Hence, in my opinion, their collapse in very few years, when,

from climate to biodiversity, from gender to race, from diseases or procreation to GMOs or nanotechnologies, critical questions all politically arose around uncertain objects, while materiality and the body burst in, reaffirming their irreducible presence in every social struggle.

It is no coincidence that pragmatism, even in its very disparate finery, became one of the controversial issues in France just at that time, at the turn of the 1980s. Initially confined to the criticism of the overhanging position of the social scientist, to the recognition of the pluralism of values, and to the revival of the notions of inquiry and trial as the means by which things are defined, it initially served more as a method than as a philosophy. The "pragmatic sociology" of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), notably, has always carefully maintained a watertight boundary between humans and non-humans. At the CSI, where we discussed a great deal with these researchers, the aim was quite different: It consisted, on the contrary, in reintegrating objects into sociology, the latter making only pretexts of them, if they were cultural objects, or raw facts, if they were natural objects. It is at the same time that we rediscovered with astonishment the radicality of James's ontological pluralism, that of things themselves in the process of being made, in an open, indeterminate world, without exteriority, whose accomplishment depends on the commitment of all: Anachronistically, we read there not only the hypotheses that ANT had in its own way defended before knowing the authors in question, but also how much the rejections and indignant arguments raised at the time by this radically anti-dualist pragmatism resembled those that had been opposed to us. It is not by chance that by now, most of ANT-readers are not sociologists but rather belong to cultural studies, gender studies, climate studies, etc., mixing activists, concerned actors, artists, philosophers, and researchers around emerging problems.

5. LETTING THINGS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

I will now take the problem through the other end of the lens. The idea is to start from the very ways in which taste and tasting are expressed, both by amateurs and by social scientists. This returns to semiology, but in a quasi-instrumental way, to make it a resource, a bit like in the early days of ANT: Can it help to shift the analysis of taste from a theory of action to an attention to the propensity of things? This leads me to emphasize the performative role of language: to take it less as a means of saying than as a tool that makes people think, that makes them "realize" things, as the double meaning of this verb puts it so well.

A pragmatics of taste starts with the recognition that we don't like things like that, by just snapping fingers. We have to laboriously make ourselves like them (Teil, Hennion, 2004). In return they themselves provide us holds, but holds that are only holds if we grasp them. This goes far beyond the common idea that we love what we

hated and hate what we loved, which would only describe the slow apprenticeship of the real quality of sophisticated objects. No, it is true of any kind of objects, the amateur and what she likes are done by each other. The vocabulary of choice and willingness is too active, the one of sudden revelation or love at first sight too passive: The question is less about what we do than about what we more or less deliberately both let and make happen and about what things themselves express, if we make ourselves sensitive to them. Throughout this sinuous process, made of unexpected infatuations and tenacious passions, it is nowhere a question of mastery, but of responding to the call of things; but also of provoking them, by relaunching them and relaunching oneself. Finally, all this process can only take place if a collective has been able to create the space for common sharing and the material organization in which they unfold.

It is important to underline that there is nothing passive about this "*se laisser faire*," letting oneself be done (Gomart, Hennion, 1999). Learning to let things "express themselves—"*laisser les choses se faire*"—" through the attention we pay to them requires, on the contrary, a meticulous collective experimentation, based on our bodies and on the objects themselves, mobilizing writings and devices. Taste is constantly rewriting its own history, in a slow process of cross-fertilization of each person's skills … but no, that would still be saying things wrong, the formulation is too dualistic: For it is less a question of developing the tastes of the amateur and the qualities of the object as two realities that would respond to each other, than of maintaining the very relationship that produces both and continuously makes both be reborn (on the case of Bach in 19th century France, see Fauquet, Hennion, 2000).

A comparison with sport can help understand this point. Indeed, contrary to what the word taste leads us towards, in sport the body dimension and the collective dimension take precedence over the very object of the activity (whether the ball crosses a line, a bar is crossed, a ball is sent back, or a mountain pass is climbed … what does it matter, in itself?!). This detour makes it clear that soccer does not exist without its rules, its equipment, its audience, the passion it unleashes, but also the very art of moving a ball between two teams, or jumping to unlikely heights at the end of a pole, or sending balls into the holes of a billiard table, it is neither the arbitrary invention of a game, nor the methodical exploitation of available resources, but rather an art of making skills and possibilities "exist more" (Souriau, 1956): both human and non-human capacities, both individual and collective ones, while realizing what things can do, if they are made to do so …

To describe this, the word "virtual" does not seem adequate to me, it acts as if these properties were already there, latent, just waiting to be exploited. The athlete's body does not exist before the sport he or she practices, any more than the touch of a racket on a ball of regulated caliber and properties, or the ability to take advantage of improbable holds to climb walls, with feet clenched in a Spanish rubber boot … It is the accumulation of training and techniques, or even the experience of the thing

itself, that develops a relationship that is increasingly well adapted between bodies that were unaware of each other. Isn't this also an excellent definition of taste? Wouldn't it be just as inaccurate to believe that wine was "already there" in the vineyards before man cultivated it, as it would be to say that man created it with his own hands? Wine is the long shared history of what grapes have been able to do, and what man could do with them (Teil, Hennion et al., 2013) … but beware, the word "could" itself is ambiguous, here again we have to watch out for the direction in which words take us in spite of ourselves ("men were capable of … " versus "it could have happened that …"): This possibility should not be understood in the sense of an initial capacity that would have been left untapped until then. Rather it should be seen as the unpredictable turn that things take, following a series of surprising interactions and unpredictable resumptions: in short, constantly re-elaborating the unforeseen. But what else is cooking?

6. A GRAMMAR OF THINGS BEING DONE "In process of making" towards an art of "*faire faire*"

In order to better define taste, I have deliberately, above, linked without measure some turns that are grammatically rather heavy, even in French but even more so in English, this language obsessed with the matter of fact, to which it is always suggestive to confront French. In a way, we are getting back to semiologists here. They would help underline how much work is required on language itself, to formulate "what it is about," "what is happening," "what is going on" in the emergence of things. French is a very rich language for this purpose; it has many tricks up its sleeve to get around the dualistic trap. Notably, it is very fond of the curious "impersonal reflexive" form (here, "*ce dont il s'agit*," "*ce qui se passe*"), that I have used a lot. Such ambiguous formulas neutralize any subject and any object, or even any action, while grammatically using only these functions; in many turns, it also plays on the finesse of the infinitive double, as in "*faire faire*," "*laisser faire*" (not to mention their combination: "*se laisser faire*," is it active or passive?). All these language tricks have been a great help, but they are difficult to translate into English: "let it be done," "let things happen," "to make do," "let oneself be taken in," etc. None of those wordings are really satisfying, nor commonly used in English. It is so much so that in English texts the expression "*faire faire*" is most often used without being translated: It perfectly sums up our theory of action—already in Greimas's work, the actant is very exactly "*ce qui fait faire*," "what makes do."

These expressions all sought to designate something like putting oneself actively in states where the objective is not the control of things, but on the contrary a kind of deliberate loss of control, in order to give things back their hand, and in return to be able to rely on their reactions to increase their virtues … Somewhat laborious

formulas indeed (as are the previous oxymorons, such as "deliberate control"), but they are valuable when talking about taste: the problem is precisely to manage to speak beyond or below the murderous efficiency of the dualistic division between subject and object, redoubled by the opposition between the active and the passive. Echoing the form of the middle voice in Ancient Greek and the constant use of the gerund in English (who is born, when is born? becoming, is it active or passive? and what about thinking, loving, and of course tasting?), we have had to forge adequate expressions to replace this "voice" that has unfortunately disappeared from modern languages, indeed quite modernistic: No, the "middle" is not "in the middle" of anything; it does not come to take its place between two pre-existing voices more clearly defined than it (the active and the passive ones); it is first, on the contrary. It designates "what happens" before any preconceived distribution of roles. In order to account for the formation of taste (everyone has pointed out that the word taste is itself a middle word, designating both the taste for things and the taste of things, the one we have and the one they have), we have therefore explicitly exploited the resources that French offers—but at the point we have reached, I would gladly say the opposite, as Annemarie Mol has shown with regard to "*lekker*" in Dutch (Mol, 2014): that nothing teaches us better to speak, to weigh up the meaning of words as if on a trebuchet, than to talk about taste.

7. A FINAL WORD: DID YOU SAY POLITICS? Taste as a lesson in the art of learning from things

The contrast between our two languages is not so anecdotal. It helps to identify these formulation issues. I like to use the example of the conductor. In English, he "conducts" his orchestra; in French, "il le fait jouer," he makes it play. Shifting from the linearity that is too clear subject-verb-complement, this double infinitive opens up the whole range of possible distributions of the action, or more precisely of "what is going on": directing or giving a direction, indicating what to do or getting into condition to go where one wants to go, or even, as with a horse, letting oneself be carried by the orchestra but giving the little signals that accentuate the finds and erase the banalities … As in the case of education (there are a thousand ways to make a pupil learn his lesson!), the formula does not distinguish between the dictator conductor, for whom making people play means forcing everyone to do what he wants, and the pedagogical conductor or, better still, the discreet stimulator of what emerges as the most pleasant or original in the course of things, to give it more consistency. Those long detours through sports, the orchestra and, above all, language did not come to me by chance in this text on taste: What other object offers a reservoir so full of experiences and practices, entirely turned towards the slow sculpture of the objects to which we are attached?

Is there a more political stance today than to collectively elaborate our ability to better catch and support the propensity of things? Isn't politics, too, an art of making agents and things exist more—or better, or less, or no longer … (Latour 2014)? For my part, on line with the lessons taste may give to politics, I would conclude in an open way by gladly adapting to the present and pressing social and ecological issues this beautiful and suggestive phrase by René Char: "[The things] that are going to come up know things about us that we do not know about them"—except Char was referring to words, not things: "Les mots qui vont surgir savent de nous des choses que nous ignorons d'eux" (Réné Char, Chant de la Balandrane, roman étranger, 1977). I didn't write this text in order to encourage social researchers to take a renewed interest in taste. In the opposite direction, I rather hope that revisiting this rich history of taste and tasting may help any committed social actors—be they researchers, artists, activists or simply concerned citizens—to get more sensitive to things in process of making.

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