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Attachments: A Pragmatist View Of What Holds Us

[draft version, not to quote]

Antoine Hennion

Centre de sociologie de l'innovation, MINES-ParisTech/CNRS UMR 7185
60 bd St-Michel, 75006 Paris, France
antoine.hennion@mines-paristech.fr

My purpose here is not to add the concept of attachment to the list of analytical concepts circulating in sociology. Quite the contrary. Concepts are supposed to be independent, abstract, and general. To analyze means to cut, to separate. It means to detach causes from effects, structure from events, rules from acts, or unseen logics from facts.¹ Attachment suggests exactly the opposite: it links, it ties, and it does not cut. Two discontinuities in particular undermine research, which in my opinion remain insufficiently challenged. The first is the idea that the more independent the scientist is of the reality she observes, the better her analysis will be; the second is the idea that the more general and independent of the specific object of an activity its explanation and/or interpretation by social scientists is, the better it will be.

Attachment is something indefinite... and must remain this way

This is what is at stake in using the word attachment: not to promote a new vocabulary and, in so doing, to defend a new analytic cut, but following in William James's steps, to explore the possibility of thinking "in continuity".² The main feature that the word attachment highlights is precisely that attachment speaks of both the fact of being attached and the thing one is attached to. Liking wine, loving music, belonging to a community or defending a cause: each time the thing in question is part of the way one can be attached to it and, reciprocally, the modality of attachment is part of its own object. Attachment tightly depends upon each specific object of attachment. This prevents defining theoretically an abstract concept of attachment, and then applying it to anything willy-nilly. That is the problem with words like habitus, motivation or interest: their first move is to cut the fact of liking or valuing from the thing or the practice being liked or valued, in order to define a

¹ Synthesis makes no better, that supposes a prior analysis.

² See James (1912), Lecture VII, "The Continuity Of Experience": 275sq.

modality or a proper logic of attachment in general. Here comes the unquestioned idea that a concept will be more scientific the more independent it is from whatever it is being applied to. How can we take an opposing tact and never allow ourselves to observe one attachment without letting it be attached to its prey? Indeed, questioning the pretention of sociology to provide general concepts, positive factors, abstract causalities as well as comprehensive principles or formal rules of action is not an easy challenge (Latour, 2005). Hence the Jamesian reference: understanding attachments amounts to finding internal local causes inside the seamless fabrics of heterogeneous realities, not to adding external explanations or interpretations to given realities. That is what experience means: attachment can only be lived, felt, experienced, and this includes the comprehension of the attachment itself. Attachment is that which holds things together and that by which things are held; it constitutes the stuff we are made from and confers agency upon us. Attachment implies a form of inertia, something that retains, but also provides support that launches us into motion. To 'be' in a state of attachment or to 'have' an attachment—the concept should be carefully distinguished from a binding or a fixture, because attachment must be made, and it must be experienced. It is both a way of being and a way of doing, it involves both feeling a tie and being a part of that tie.

The very word is of special interest because it expresses a mute force of connection that can only be discovered through trials and testing. What is more, to speak of attachment does not prejudge the merit or the importance of certain types of connection. The word has the rather daring quality of remaining in a state of flux, in a primary state of indeterminacy. Attachment is precisely what produces determination beyond any distinction between the determined and the determining—when we say 'she is a very determined person', we paradoxically use a passive form to say a very active disposition. The same is true with all those things we like so much to be driven by, those 'obsessions' we aptly say 'we couldn't live without' or 'we can't get enough of', be they candies or diets, little manias or dangerous dependencies like smoking: are we deciding or are we compelled? What perfect examples of being active while being truly passive. But we frequently, without any compunction, claim we are being pushed in an imperious fashion to act at the very same time as we are profoundly engaged in doing.³ The very grammar of all these phrases places us well beyond the senseless binary opposition between activity and passivity.⁴

What keeps us attached?

As we can now see, there is nothing accidental about the indefinite character of the notion of attachment. The topic of this piece is how to capture this indeterminacy with words. We will consider it as the result of an assessment made in response to an experience or a trial.⁵ There is nothing like an accident, a separation, or the obligation to choose to bring us to an awareness of what carries real weight among the things, people, or situations that we believe we love. Our question has the merit of suggesting that testing precedes the

³L. Thévenot (2006) discusses the same fluidity of meaning with regards to the concept of engagement, in which we pivot between the 'act of engaging' and the fact of 'being engaged'. Having carried out a lengthy critical review of the literature on collective action, Céfaï (2007) takes a position that would also avoid mechanical determinism in his minute analysis of how people get mobilized.

⁴ See *infra*, footnote 8.

⁵ I do indeed start by assembling the elements of a definition, but this will be less about establishing a list of properties than about qualifying the word by its gaps, by what it leaves open, and by what it refuses to do.

outcome—to know what we cling to it must be put to the test. When attachment imposes its presence it does so without presenting reasons. There is no stated criteria other than the recognition of the attachment itself that will answer the question of what an attachment is. Neither the importance, pertinence, nor even the nature of attachment is initially at stake: we can feel a loss without knowing precisely what has been lost. No dramatic tension need be invoked either, since these things to which we are attached present themselves in and among more neutral choices too—which wine to drink with this meal, who to sit next to at the table, which track to listen to in the morning. These are the countless little nothing that mean everything to us—we can be held very strongly to something that does matter in the least to others ("it's nothing", "it's not important", as we say casually without truly believing it ourselves).

Attachment cannot be registered in terms of causes, or intentions. Neither does it belong to the vocabulary of action, even if it can be grappled with through this language. Attachment is more like a liability, in the sense the word has taken on in business: an obligation from the past that is brought to bear on the present. Except that—and this is the point—there are no tricks of accounting able to produce such accounts. There is no possible equivalence that can be drawn out of what looks like a list of incommensurables, a potpourri: our way of having breakfast, an obsession for one's career, the Sunday football game with old buddies or the planet that needs to be saved. The justifications for attachment only come when they are called upon—to defend a taste, a practice or a habit; to share it with others; to oblige ourselves to renounce it; to weigh what it costs to maintain it, 'live with' it, or even abandon it. An attachment's contingent or occasional appearance which may seem at first to contradict its imperious nature is another paradoxical feature of what it means to be attached. Since it must be put to trial and the opportunities for testing are rarely continuous, attachment depends strictly upon circumstances in the strongest sense of the word.⁶ But the fact of being casual, depending, and undetermined does not prevent one attachment from reappearing insistently in a variety of related manifestations.

An action without actors

What attaches us, and to what are we attached? This question has other merits that follow from the preceding characteristics, but which were less apparent in "What keeps us attached?", my former punchier formulation of the question. As we have now grasped step by step, attachment is not only indeterminate, constraining and situational, but it is also symmetrical. Do we hold onto something or does something hold onto us? Beyond such reciprocity, which would remain profoundly dualist, the connections to the diverse natures in which we are entangled, that hold us and which hold us together, call for a redistribution of agency⁷, deployed in the interlacing of ins and outs where every connection does something, but where none is sufficient on its own. As Bruno Latour has noted, the idea of attachment immediately implies a challenge to the notion of causality to the benefit of a much less tidy set of interactions: fumbling, scraping up against, mutual coaching. Instead of clear distinctions between dependent things and determining ones, we pass to the continuity

⁶ Fortunately, our attachment to freedom only gains substance when it is being threatened.

⁷ This was a long-term debate (*e.g.* Taylor, 1985; Beck, 1992; Archer, 2000), to which ANT scholars gainfully contributed (Law, [1992] 2003; Callon & Law, 1995; Callon & Rabeharisoa, 2004; Latour, 2005).

of a less trenchant but infinitely more productive form of distributed action disseminated in these networks (Latour, 1999b).⁸

Let us draw to a close this wholesale unwrapping of traits, ways of seeing things, and turns of thought that the word attachment can raise. But before we do so there is one other somewhat forgotten dimension of this expression. Attachment signifies a bind, restriction, restraint, and dependence that reminds us we are prisoners, confined on all sides by our history and our environment. Yet in some ways, the word has been unburdened of these negative connotations. In its most common meanings attachment first invokes the relationship of a mother to her young, in the most corporal dimension of bodily contact, dependence and protection, and love for another. This form of attachment was invented by psychologists.⁹ This is also how the term is mobilized by pragmatic sociologists of action inside of a much more general formulation of forms of engagement in the world, where attachment is naturally associated to a regime of familiarity, to the domestic "cité" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006).¹⁰ The other more frequent usage of attachment relates, to the contrary, to profound convictions and strong engagements, to the most general and generous of ideals: these are the attachment to values like justice or freedom. Indeed, even if in a much less exclusive fashion, less precise words such as 'bond' or 'tie' can also easily teeter from a negative idea like constraint or restriction to an idea that is not just positive but is cherished and revered. Within a domestic register the word becomes charged with all the richness of the things that are associated with it: bonds for example to our near and dear, to places, to memberships, to a mother tongue, or to origins.

Inversely, however, attachment has no reason to limit itself to things that are agreeable, grand or sublime, because it is not in the content of what happens to us that it takes on its positive value but in the way it is experienced. I would go so far as to say that, to the contrary, it is with regards to difficult problems—such as destructive behaviors or painful situations, states of weakness or vulnerability, disability, chronic illness, alcoholism, drug addiction, Alzheimer's, or simply the process of aging and decline—that speaking in terms of attachment generates the most vigorous alternative forms of understanding.¹¹ This is precisely because in turning existence into a long series of trials in the more technical and less affective sense that I just gave to this word, these problems, difficulties or weaknesses impose and oblige a turn towards pragmatism. What can it mean, from the point of view of a disabled person, to say that one performs disability—and so makes it a capacity—instead of saying someone "is" disabled or "has" a handicap? It means that people carry such conditions with them. What keeps us attached, what makes us hold together: these problems impose an abandonment of the paralyzing oscillation between medical definitions and social definitions in order to concentrate attention on the constitutive dimension of what it is, in

⁸ French uses interesting ways of getting away from the binary oscillation between active/passive, as the pronominal form ("il se produit ceci"), or the double infinitive, like "faire faire": "ceci lui a fait faire cela", "this has had someone or something do something", or "se laisser faire": active or passive?! Those reflexive forms are the contemporary trace of the ancient Greek middle form, that precedes the cleavage of the active from the passive (Benveniste 1966 p. 175; Latour, 1999a: 21; Hennion *et al.*, 2000: 166; Hennion, 2007: 106).

⁹ In D.W. Winnicott's (1965) wake a whole theory was made of attachment (Ainsworth, 1968; Bowlby, 1978), most notably to defend family therapy.

¹⁰ A "city", in their vocabulary, is an order of worth materialized in a circumscribed arena.

¹¹ We have tackled these situations in a seminar entitled 'Altered Humanities', moving beyond the oscillation between stigma and identity (« Humanités altérées », A. Hennion & J. Roux, CSI/MoDyS).

fact, to be in these conditions. But in spite of reluctant bodies people also ceaselessly and regularly rearrange these conditions, during every new ordeal that imposes a test; they tame these conditions by articulating themselves to others, to places, to things and to themselves. People remake this state of disability into what they are in the very process while they are getting themselves used to their own state (Hennion *et al.*, 2012).¹²

The body endures the test: taste as activity

Attachment is experienced – "éprouvé".¹³ The 'experience', by which we mean from French to put to the test but also to feel, requires a body. What is this body that is tested, feels, works and is worked, endures and responds, and forges itself through experimentation as in the body of the athlete, the patient, the amateur, the handicap, the pianist? The body that each one is and the body that each one has, as M. Merleau-Ponty strikingly reminds us,¹⁴ is a body that we cannot escape. At the same time, it is a support and a medium that reacts. Bodies are not any more of a given than objects or states of being. They are also defined, to the contrary, by this strange already evoked mix of indeterminacy and resistance. The body is decidedly made of exactly the same material as the attachments that weigh on it.¹⁵ No balance sheet can stop the body's deployment. It is entirely tributary, flowing forth from the contacts it makes. Bodies are stubborn and persistent, but their suppleness and reformation is continuous. My work on amateurs precisely tried to value their practice as a way of making bodies, things emerge through their relationship: they are my little teachers in pragmatism. In a sense, as STS have given back objects their *agency*, by insisting on the corporeal engagement of the amateur I try to render *patience* to the passionate.

Indeed, as shows the amateur, the grammar of attachment is a strange one, perpendicular to the active/passive axis, difficult to put into words. My work with Geneviève Teil on taste, or rather on the ways in which the amateur 'makes himself love' things (Hennion & Teil, 2003; 2004), awkwardly attempted to find an expression of such a grammar of taste: in the thread of « faire faire »¹⁶, we used « se faire aimer », therefore, or « se mettre à aimer »¹⁷ ("to have oneself love something"), and reciprocally "to assist things to express themselves". But we had to resort to many other labored turns of phrase, like "to put oneself in a condition to actively be affected by", or "to let oneself go into the grip of the object while continuing to value it" in the lovely double sense of the word value.¹⁸ How could

¹² Also see F. Guichet & *al.* (2009) for a series of case studies of homecare workers working with critically dependant people. The volume contains a review of disability studies (pp. 8-10) with an emphatic critique of approaches that would favor stigmatization and social representation, over empirically research into how people in these situations define their own states of being (Murphy, 1987; Zola, 1989; Winance, 2001).

¹³ « Éprouver » in French, as "to experience" in English, means both to try and to feel, or even more strongly, to put to the test and to be afflicted.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1st part: « Le corps »).

¹⁵ « De la même étoffe », says W. James (in French; maybe we should say "of the same fabric"), in « La notion de conscience », 1912 [ed. in James, 1976].

¹⁶ B. Latour borrowed this formula from A. Greimas (1976), with his actants ('what does the doing') which permitted the detachment of the question of action from that of the subject.

¹⁷ Again here, this curious 'middle form' pronominal in French, pointing at a state neither active nor passive: « se mettre à » means "to begin to", but the grammar clearly says that this implies a self-move: literally it says "to put oneself into movement in order to..."

¹⁸ In his plea for a social science that would be a 'theory of valuation', J. Dewey (1939) pulled out the impressive series of words that mean at once praised and priced, lovable and expensive: dear, esteemed, appreciated, precious, valued etc. The same is true in French.

we signify such a paradox: the fine articulation of attentiveness and fastidious control (in things even when these go unrestrained) with abandon and zeal (which is itself immediately re-restrained by evaluation, narratives of experience, and appropriation into stories)?

Attachments, like these formulations, are heavy and circular. They play outside of the linguistic dualism between active and the passive and between subject and the object, which is best expressed by words such as pleasure or passion. Nobody understands these to be about passivity; they are instead kinds of actions to the power of two that target their opposite: overflowing boundaries and possession by an object.¹⁹ At the risk of presenting a deceptive simplification, we could say that attachment is the 'passive' inverse (passive in the budgetary sense I gave the word earlier) of assemblage (Latour, 2005), which captures the more active side of making connections. Assemblages are a way of redistributing action and human volition in a cosmology of disparate 'actants'. It is therefore a way of redoing politics—the process of deciding what kind of world we want—in a way that be at last engaged with things. For its part, attachment insists on the fact that to do so, we have to abandon ourselves. It insists on the necessity of being arrested by things, of feeling what we are through resistance, and of weighing what ties us to the world—to remake the world, the world must be felt. With assemblage, B. Latour revisits J. Dewey, recharging the philosopher's 'concerns' with the weight of things that fill up the world. The work done by attachment is complementary. We take W. James and his '*pragmata*', and deploy them into a world filled (thanks to STS) with techniques and collectives that James himself blissfully ignored.

Having differences matter

My own work on attachment had begun with the experience of amateurs. The first step is returning the body of the taster, treated as an accomplishment, to the scene. In comparing wine and music but also in comparing more far flung objects like the climber's canyon, the footballer's field, or even the singer's voice, we effectively capture all the delicate work that must be deployed in order to become sensitive to the differences that matter. That work—on the self, on one's body, and one's spirit—has to be done both in the moment and over the long term (Hennion, 2007). As much as it is a form of bodily work, taste is about working up objects to make differences in them emerge, which reciprocally can only come across to those who sense these differences. Attachment through and through—but from the point of view of the amateur who knows this better than anyone else, the paradox is inversed: their main concern is about things that are not in any way more given than bodies.²⁰ To those who are not interested in them, the trajectory of a balloon, the asperities in a rock face, the swing of a racket, the pitch of a voice, are nothing more than chance occurrences in an inert world, totally uninteresting. Symphonies, games or wines, it's all the same thing. Whether it is hip-hop or French lute sonatas, repertoires are simply boring catalogues. But this indifference *of* things which an indifference *to* things provokes does not mean that tastes are just arbitrary signs, as critical sociology puts it. On the contrary, a

¹⁹ The word passion can be somewhat misleading by adding the idea that attachment is an extreme format, but this is not obligatory. Passion is but one format among others. Attachment refers just as much to the tastes that are most familiar.

²⁰ This is the definition of *pragmata* given by W. James (1912), those 'things in their plurality' (James, 1909: 210). One can think also of the place G.H. Mead (1932) gives to the "physical thing" in the consciousness we get of the world, through their "manipulation".

pragmatist view invites us to take the co-construction in forming tastes seriously. The word 'taste' itself says as much. It indicates the taste of things just as well as having a taste for things. Neither of the two is a given, but they discover each other in the act of testing. The process of making oneself appreciate is indissociable from the process of making things arrive. Making things happen, deploying their pertinent differences at the same time as we deploy the capacity and the pleasure of feeling these differences. To think about the activity of the amateur as an attachment is to insist on the fact that it is work done out of a tightly woven tissue of individual and collective past experiences that have built up the sensibility of the amateur, little by little. These experiences have defined a domain filled with objects and nuances, of know-how and repertoires, of criteria and techniques, of common histories and contested evolutions. Thinking in this way therefore means that the activity-sensibility of the amateur is caught in tight linkages, without which it would have no consistency.

This activity-sensibility implies that far from dampening the experience of tasting or rendering it repetitive, the weight of these interconnected linkages enlivens taste. These linkages give the object of taste a chiseled precision that permits the most subtle criteria that define its quality for this one or another to be examined in an open and polemical fashion. This demands that tastes be re-enacted every time, as the word performance, common to sports and to art, aptly indicates: taste is also a performance. By the same token, this makes it possible for taste to constantly produce something unexpected. Even active and obstinate repetition is a positive, methodical reaffirmation and not a mechanical reproduction of a given taste. The necessity of permanent performance challenges as much the idea of automatic repetition as it does of creation *ex nihilo*. To enter into the experiences to which amateurs submit themselves each time is demanding. It requires them to return to the condition, sharpen their expectations, mobilize their attention, and reinvest in the object or force it to render what it has given once. Without this the object itself would have no chance of arriving in the strongest sense of the term. It unlocks a presence that must be conquered each time. Taste must be ceaselessly tested, confronted or put into question. Outside of this understanding we would be hard-pressed to explain why football fans return to see matches, why music-lovers go to concerts, or why wine enthusiasts keep on tasting wines that they know they love, and try other ones (Teil, 2004; Hennion, 2007; DeNora, 2011).

Conclusion: accompanying the course of things

In conclusion, I would like to address the practical consequences that such a use of 'attached' concepts—of words which come from actors and which are destined to return to them—has for the practice of sociology. If a concept becomes too detached it names no problem, becomes auto-referential, and ceases to reply to anything other than itself in a closed system. But if it is not detached enough then it does no work, it does not introduce any difference between itself as a concept and words that are commonly being used with opposite meanings, precisely because words are born of problems that are not yet resolved and of emerging situations which must be put into words to be better acted upon.

The shared histories of disabled persons struggling to be recognized and of disability research, which has described their extended struggle, provide a striking example of this type of crossed relationship between actors and sociologists. It demonstrates with great clarity the method of an 'attached' sociologist: picking out words that put the lived experience of the bodies and the collectives that are emerging into words. Here too, linked to the transformations in the conception of democracy that I have just invoked, history has

moved quickly and in strict proximity with the social sciences. In just a few years several related problems have been radically reformulated from a question of social representation to the demands of self-production. All of the vocabularies employed by the movements for the handicapped, the mentally ill, and old people (to name them by their foreclosed designations) are steeped in social sciences. With the support of researchers, with input from them, and sometimes through the vigor or rage channeled by their questions, these movements have shifted away from combating the stigma that E. Goffman (1963) made so visible, namely the denunciation of identity by others cloaked in normative mantles. They have shifted to an emphasis on people's unique experiences and on concretely analyzing personal situations.

As the movements have changed so have the words. Not because the words were false, but to the contrary because they had completed their work. Words accompany a constant reconfiguration that, in a single gesture, makes them cease to grasp what is happening as the world they trace is being slowly taken to pieces. Concepts are articulations that make things come into being as they pronounce them (Taylor, 1985).

I can draw no other lesson but the following: sociologists are in a better position to make a contribution as they get closer, more involved, and more attentive to peoples' and collectives' lived experiences. Sociologists resonate, and sometimes, like midwives, deliver the world that is coming.²¹ Saying that we are attached is saying that rather than observing or participating, we accompany. This is the very meaning of the word 'method', making the journey together. Sociology is not a profession that works from an objective distance. And we really may wonder whether it is so ideal to render the lively and the mobile cold and inert. We modestly put into words the problems and concerns emerging around us and sometimes emerging thanks to us. This work surpasses by far the vain pretensions of objective intellectuals (Callon, 1999).

In the case of disabilities, this shared work has led to innovative inquiry, notably on the production of identity and on the body as it emerges through material and collective devices, as well as on the ethical and political value of seeking to create as-yet-untried capacities for disabled people. If the concepts that mobilized disabled persons were so strongly sociological, we must recognize that far from being a recent phenomenon—that is, the indication of a modern world that is choking on reflexivity—this observation could be made for the 'old' list of sociological concepts that I evoked: classes, institutions, professions, statuses, and networks. It is not difficult to see that all of these words also emerged from problems posed and battles waged by concrete actors. The words were not invented by sociologists to name previously ignored realities. And if they have become less pertinent it is not because they were ill-forged, nor is it that the realities they refer to have completely vanished, which is what we dream of with the stale debate about social class. It is that both the world and the words have been transformed, notably due to the work of sociologists. We should not fight to retain concepts when their defeat is a measure of their success. When they have put in their work and *done their time*, concepts expire. This is what I hope for attachment!

²¹ Here, the environment comes to mind. We would certainly be in a different landscape were not for the work done by the social sciences to get it on the political agenda (Beck, 1992; Latour, 2004).

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