The wrong bin bag: A turn to ontology in science and technology studies?

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Abstract
There is in science and technology studies a perceptible new interest in matters of ‘ontology’. Until recently, the term ‘ontology’ had been sparingly used in the field. Now it appears to have acquired a new theoretical significance and lies at the centre of many programmes of empirical investigation. The special issue to which this essay is a contribution gathers a series of enquiries into the ontological and reflects, collectively, on the value of the analytical and methodological sensibilities that underpin this new approach to the make-up of the world. To what extent and in what sense can we speak of a ‘turn to ontology’ in science and technology studies? What should we make of, and with, this renewed interest in matters of ontology? This essay offers some preliminary responses to these questions. First, we examine claims of a shift from epistemology to ontology and explore in particular the implications of the notion of ‘enactment’. This leads to a consideration of the normative implications of approaches that bring ‘ontological politics’ to centre stage. We then illustrate and pursue these questions by using an example – the case of the ‘wrong bin bag’. We conclude with a tentative assessment of the prospects for ontologically sensitive science and technology studies.

Keywords
enactment, epistemology, materiality, normativity, ontology

From epistemology to ontology
The most explicit impetus of new ontological investigations in science and technology studies (STS) is the desire to avoid being caught up in the description and qualification
of ‘perspectives’. It is an effort to circumvent epistemology and its attendant language of representation in favour of an approach that addresses itself more directly to the composition of the world. If, as Viveiros de Castro (2004: 483) noted, modern philosophy is characterized by ‘the massive conversion of ontological into epistemological questions’, then the turn to ontology operates as a reversal of this trajectory: it short-circuits the tendency to rephrase questions about the reality of multiple worlds as questions about the multiple ways in which a singular world is represented, and in so doing stimulates an alertness towards forms of difference that cannot be reduced to a disparity of ‘worldviews’.

Yet, this presumed transition, from ‘mere’ matters of epistemology (back) to a consideration of ontological world-making, raises some interesting issues for STS. The field is founded on the empirical investigation of how science and technology are done and made – a form of enquiry that can best be described, in contrast to epistemology, as ‘epistemography’ (Dear, 2001). Moreover, STS is famous for the deflationary tactic of turning the keywords of epistemology into what Lynch described as ‘epistopics’, inquiries into the situated use and accomplishment of grandiose theoretical concepts. For STS, the purpose of these investigations was not to provide more satisfactory answers to old epistemological questions, but rather to displace the framework that accorded them their central, obtrusive quality (Lynch, 1993). Having developed its characteristic analytical sensibilities in a series of moves of deflation and deflection, it would be odd if STS were now to embark on a project to champion one or another version of ontology. Instead, we will argue, the turn to ontology in STS can be better understood as another attempt to apply its longstanding core slogan – ‘it could be otherwise’ – this time to the realm of the ontological.

The history of STS complicates any simplistic distinction (or transition) between ontology and epistemology. Contrary to those who see in ‘constructivism’ a programme focused on the investigation of ideational and discursive forms (see, for instance, Coole and Frost, 2010), the field has long advanced an analytical programme that foregrounds the instrumental, performative and material dimensions implied in the making of facts and artefacts (cf. Hacking, 1983; Haraway, 1991; Latour, 1988). ‘Representation’ has rarely been treated in STS as the sort of ‘epistemological’ or meta-physical construct that some proponents of the ontological turn seem to want to turn against.1 When one considers the long tradition of research into the materialization of technoscientific entities (see, for a recent example, Mody, 2011), the attention to embodied practices and practices of embodiment (e.g. Myers, 2008) or the classic accounts of the co-production of epistemological and political order (Jasanoff, 2004; Shapin and Schaffer, 1985), it is clear that the field’s interrogation of knowledge-making can hardly be described as a study of conceptual or cognitive ‘perspectives’.

Thus, as the question mark at the end of this essay’s title seeks to convey, the significance (and direction) of the turn in this avowed ‘turn to ontology’ is not immediately evident.2 ‘Ontology’ has sometimes been used as a sort of signifier to claim a more thorough-going or insistent form of deconstruction (e.g. Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985), but it remains unclear how claims about the ontological composition of the world differ from more conventional propositions about the social construction, co-production, or performative constitution of a certain reality.
How, then, to understand the turn to ontology in STS? What is new and useful in the
forms of empirical investigation that claim such an orientation? First, the interest
in ontology within STS points to the fact that, at least in some quarters, the analytical
repertoire of the field is seen as insufficiently attuned to the multiplicity and degrees of
alterity of the worlds that science and technology bring into being. In this sense, the
turn to ontology would be a way of drawing out the full implications of many other turns:
the materialist, performative, instrumental or experimental sensibilities developed by
the field over the last two decades. Even if, as van Heur et al. (2013, 355) argue in their
contribution to this issue, STS ‘has not been turned’, it seems to have gathered a new
analytical momentum from combining, under the guise of ontology, a set of widely held
intuitions and sensibilities.

The seemingly mundane nature of many of the objects of empirical investigation
illuminated by ontological analysis is particularly telling. For example, Ashmore (2005)
has suggested, in his review of Annemarie Mol’s (2002) The Body Multiple, that the
fundamental contribution to STS of the ontological turn is its power to draw renewed
critical attention to objects that might otherwise appear ‘finished’ or ‘ready-made’, to
scrutinize those entities that a conventional STS analysis would often consider ‘black-
boxed’ and no longer controversial. Probing the ontology of mundane entities not only
serves to display the multiplicity of realities hidden under everyday and seemingly
undisputed signifiers – it is also, as Law and Lien (2013, 363) indicate in their contri-
bution to this issue, a method of drawing attention to ‘a penumbra of not quite realized
realities’, the failed, unseen or not-yet-real possibilities hinted at by ordering practices.
Investigating the composition of ontological realities would thus be a way of challenging
any presumption of order or completion in the world – especially those forms of order
and completion that have been dear to STS scholarship.

The purpose of researching ontology, then, would not be to arrive at a better formula-
tion of the reality of the world, or of the ways in which the world is real, but to interfere
with the assumption of a singular, ordered world, and to do so by re-specifying hefty
meta-physical questions in mundane settings and in relation to apparently stabilized
objects. In our view, the ‘turn to ontology’ is a way of inflecting our approximation to the
world(s) that we study and create by instilling an enhanced analytical sensibility towards
multi-naturalism (Latour, 2004). By moving away from questions of ‘knowledge’ and
‘representation’, concerns over accuracy of reference and epistemic commensurability
are meant to wither away in favour of, as Mol (2002) puts it, a new curiosity about ‘the
way objects are enacted in practices’ (p. vii).

‘Enactment’

What about that last verb? ‘Enacting’ and ‘enactment’ are key terms in the appropriation
of the ontological lexicon by STS. What form of inquiry is enabled by this idiom, what
sort of analysis is ‘enacted’ by these terms?

Exploring how objects are ‘enacted in practices’ implies, first, a refusal to draw on
‘context’ as an explanatory or descriptive tool. Objects do not acquire a particular
meaning in, or because of, a given context; they cannot be accounted for by reference to the
external circumstances of their existence. Rather, objects are brought into being, they are
realized in the course of a certain practical activity, and when that happens, they crystal-
ize, provisionally, a particular reality, they invoke the temporary action of a set of cir-
cumstances. This position echoes the distinction made by early ethnomethodology
between ‘context of action’ and ‘context in action’ – that is, between context as an
explanatory resource available exclusively to the analyst, and context as an emergent
property of interaction available to its participants (e.g. Wieder, 1974; for a more recent
elaboration of contexts and ‘contexting’, see Asdal and Moser, 2012; Law and Moser,
2012). As we will discuss later in this essay, this re-specification of the analytic status of
context is also highly consequential for the use of a wide range of allied terms – prevail-
ing conditions, circumstances, situation, setting, climate, environment and so on. The
notion of enactment throws into doubt our routine social-scientific use of these explana-
tory staples.

Enacting also emphasizes the generative power of the practices involved in the con-
stitution of reality. The empirical focus of ontological investigations is on the practices
of world-making. This, again, resonates with powerful intellectual traditions in STS,
particularly the language of performativity (Pickering, 1995). An earlier, characteristi-
cally ‘epistemological’ concern was to expose the contingent bases of representation
and thereby promote a sceptical view of the relation between representation and the
world. In contrast, the new approach eschews the implication that the world pre-exists
representational practices and favours instead the assumption that practices (which can
no longer be considered merely ‘representational’) perform the world (Coopmans et al.,
2013). This contrast, however, is not always clear-cut – various STS approaches and
traditions have employed a wide variety of terms to depict the activities and practices of
description; enactment is one of a cluster of related terms used to adduce a form of scepti-
cism about essentialism and about the notion that entities pre-exist our apprehension of
them. These terms can be arranged along a rough continuum from weak to strong scep-
ticism: social shaping, aggregating, affording, providing for, constructing, apprehend-
ing, performing, accomplishing, bringing into being, constituting and enacting (Woolgar
and Neyland, 2013). ‘Social shaping’ connotes a relatively mild intervention in pre-
sumptions about the pre-existence of entities, and ‘enacting’ connotes the most
provocative.

The turn to ontology proposes that various modes of enactment bring about a multi-
plicity of objects, constituted in diverse socio-material settings and equally (and distinc-
tively) real. This gives rise to what Latour (1993) termed ‘variable ontologies’ or Mol
(2013) describes as a series of kaleidoscopic juxtapositions, a multiplicity of figurations
that is qualitatively different from other varieties of pluralism in STS. Importantly, this
diversity is not reducible to a logic of ‘translation’, the idiom with which STS has often
accounted for the existence of different versions of the real. The relationship between the
different versions of salmon discussed by Law and Lien (2013), for instance, is not that
of an entity traduced differently in different contexts, or moving from one kind of setting
to another and in the process acquiring a new set of properties.

This latter kind of analysis is characteristic of a wide range of scholarly treatment of
objects and things. For example, Appadurai’s (1986) well-known collection on the
‘social lives of things’ examines ‘the ways in which people find value in things and
things give value to social relations’ and considers how things are used, circulated,
bought and sold in a variety of social and cultural settings. Of central importance to this approach is the ironic analytical stance taken with respect to the object.4 It is assumed that it is the same object that undergoes different interpretations and moves through different settings. For example, in that collection Geary (1986) discusses how the circulation of relics – clothes and objects associated with saints, as well as body parts – gave value to the social and cultural structures in which they circulated. Taste in specific relics changed appreciably over the centuries, as did the relative importance of relics compared with other sorts of human and supernatural powers (Geary, 1986: 179). As part of a complex mechanism of circulation, the value of a relic could vary according to whether it was the subject of gift, theft, commerce or value reconstruction. This central feature of the approach is made explicit in the summary claim that people attribute (different) meanings to things. The implication, then, is that there is an essence of the thing, a perhaps meaningless kernel (or at least a bottom line residual identity) that survives all these complex historical and cultural attributions of meaning. But what could an object be without a meaning?5

Rather than the same salmon acquiring different ‘meanings’, what Law and Lien (2013) pose in their article is a sort of coexistence, an adjacency or at least co-presence of objects that are perfectly and discretely real. This in turn means that the ways in which differently enacted entities come to seem to be the same ‘thing’ is the upshot of active practical work rather than a reflection of any innate commonality or characteristic. As Mol argues in *The Body Multiple*, for the atherosclerosis enacted in the pathology laboratory to be considered the same as the atherosclerosis enacted in the doctor’s surgery, ‘coordination work’ has to be carried out. Other STS accounts have made use of the idiom of ‘choreography’ to describe the practical work of alignment that creates a commensurate world (cf. Cussins, 1996).6 Needless to say, these processes of singularization are always fragile achievements – when they are achieved at all. As Brives (2013) shows in her analysis of patients caught up in clinical and research settings, more often than not different ontologies will remain resolutely distinct. In her account, the alternative figurations of bodies and viruses produced by scientific trials and routine care will meet but not necessarily fit together; they rub up against each other – with the frictions and dilemmas that that contact entails – but are never mutually adjusted (Brives, 2013).

In principle, there seems to be no limit to the kinds of entity that might be treated as susceptible to enactment. Objects, persons, things, facts, theories, instruments and so on can all be enacted. Interestingly, however, the scope of entities associated with ontological enactment in STS has thus far been fairly limited. Two trends are discernible. First, a great deal of attention has been given to the ontological fluctuations of biological or biotechnological forms of life, whether it is the ‘ontological choreography’ of contemporary modes of biological reproduction (Thompson, 2007), the ‘ontological indeterminacy’ of phantomatic organisms (Schrader, 2010) or the generative qualities of vitalism and its ‘non-essentialist ontology’ (Fraser et al., 2005). Life represents here the ultimate form of enactment: living things provide the fulcrum for an examination of the inconstancy and fluidity of different varieties of ‘being’ – they display all the subtle oscillations between being and non-being, or being and becoming.

Second, the ‘turn to ontology’ is often synonymous with a close examination of the constitution of material objects. This foregrounding is in line with the enhanced emphasis
on materiality championed by, among other movements, actor-network theory, and traditionally taken up by anthropologists under the rubric of ‘material culture’ (Hicks, 2010; Miller, 1987). Yet it raises an interesting tension between the general applicability of the notion of ontological enactment and the tendency to assign agential priority or causal primacy to the ‘materiality’ of objects (cf. Barad, 2007). Despite many claims linking an interest in ontological matters with the emergence of ‘new materialisms’ (see, for instance, Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010), there is no obvious reason why the ‘ontic turn’ should imply or be coupled with a presumption of the agential power of matter. Quite the opposite, the physical identity, durability, obduracy and recalcitrance of material objects – in short, all the traits that would qualify a certain entity as ‘material’ – should in principle be treated as practical achievements, as qualities that are also ‘enacted in practices’ (cf. Gomart, 2002; Lezaun, 2012). In other words, ‘materiality’, just as ‘context’ and its cognate terms, needs to be understood as the contingent upshot of practices, rather than a bedrock reality to be illuminated by an ontological investigation.

A similarly strong claim is sometimes made about the politics or normative implications of a turn to ontology. It has been suggested that a world of multiple realities, fluid and diverse in its ontological possibilities, is one where political questions acquire a new salience. Attending to ontological matters ‘washes away the singularity of the real’ (Law, 2004: 5) and ushers in a pluralism that does not simply reflect a plurality of worldviews, but a plurality of worlds (Henare et al., 2006: 10–12). As a result, it is argued that political questions can no longer be camouflaged under methodological pretences; difference cannot be tackled simply through the mechanism of deliberative or discursive reconciliation. Whereas a plurality of worldviews can be confronted with cosmopolitan irony, detachment or tolerance, a plurality of worlds, the argument goes, forces a starker, cosmopolitical choice: in which world would you like to live, and what can you do to bring such a world into being? This is what Papadopoulos (2011) defines as ‘constituent politics’, an inescapably normative concern with the making-up of alternative worlds (see also Latour, 2004; Stengers, 2011).

In other words, ontological investigations would be tied to a certain intensity of normative preoccupation and political intervention. In her discussion of ontonorms in this issue, for instance, Mol (2013) offers a striking formulation of the relationship between the analytical and normative stances of an investigation into the ontological constitution of reality. If dietary advice, as she argues, leads to a set of practices that enact a particular kind of body, the point of the analysis is not to pass judgment on that ontological construction with the help of a pre-existing set of criteria. ‘The art’, writes Mol, ‘is rather in analysing the norms embedded in practices while interfering in them through adding a novel, oblique analysis’ (p. 381). This is a provocative claim, but a number of questions immediately arise from this association of ontological enactment with political and/or normative stances. The STS analyst shows here how the dietary body is enacted. But does this showing amount to any more than the well-established form of revelation characteristic of invoking the ‘it could be otherwise’ clause? In what sense does this analysis ‘interfere’ with practices any more than any other STS analysis that points to contingency in the building of a certain entity? For an analytic move to acquire the status of interference, should we not at least be told about the practicalities of engagement between analyst, object of research and audience (cf. Woolgar et al., 2009)? In what ways and to
what extent does an analysis of ontological enactment offer a qualitatively different form of provocation from existing STS analyses, and in what sense can it be said to carry a different kind of relationship to normative or political stances?

In contrast, in her contribution to this issue Marres (2013: 431) points to the ‘normative variability of objects’ – a variability that emerges when the ‘turn to ontology’ is construed in experimental rather than empirical terms (see also Marres, 2012). If empirical ontology draws attention to the practices that determine ‘what there is’ and to how the norms embedded in those practices then grant the world a particular political valence, an experimentalization of ontology opens up (rather than answers) the question of how particular objects come to be invested with normative and political capacities. This investment is far from inscribed into a particular manner of being – it is far from being ‘ontological’, in the philosophical interpretation of the term – but tends to be a precarious, transient and often ambiguous achievement (see also Marres and Lezaun, 2011).

In sum then, we see that in many respects, the turn to ontology offers opportunities for a more insistent, thorough-going and provocative critical analysis of world-making and that it demands a full reckoning with the many other turns and inflections that have characterized the evolution of STS in the past decades. Yet it also raises questions about how exactly this form of enquiry differs in kind from existing analyses into the constitution of reality, whether the distinction between epistemology and ontology is clear-cut and adds much to the current trajectory of STS, what is involved in enactment and coordination work and whether ontological politics necessitate (or enable) a new form of political normativity. In the next section, we address these questions with reference to a particular empirical example.

The situated ontology of mundane governance: the wrong bin bag

In order to tackle these weighty questions, we turn to a specific episode of contention about the status of an object, as reported in a British tabloid newspaper. Our analysis centres on the media coverage of an episode in which a woman was fined by her local council for (allegedly) using the ‘wrong’ kind of black plastic sack for her rubbish. It is customary to introduce such a specific example by providing an indication of its context. We provide no exception to this custom – see the brief comment below about the salience of the chosen example. However, and in line with our earlier remarks, we wish to resist the temptation simply to take this next description as a definitive statement of ‘the context’. Descriptions construed as conveying the actual ‘context’ can all too quickly be regarded as sufficient explanations of what is happening. Rather, we argue that an important corollary of our under-the-skin approach to ontological analysis is to appreciate how the invocation, construction and constitution of ‘the context’ are intimately implicated in the situated determination of what the object is. In other words, the construction and invocation of ‘the context’ turns out to be important for the achievement of the ontological character of the entities at stake. This does not mean that we should try to avoid specification of context. Even if that were possible, it would not be desirable. Instead, we pursue a reflexive perspective on the invocations of context that we (unavoidably) deploy.
The wrong bin bag episode took place at a time of highly charged public concern in the United Kingdom about the regulation and control of waste disposal. This included questions about excessive government interference, the intrusion of the nanny state and the over-zealous policing of matters thought to be better left to the autonomy of the private individual. At the same time, a vociferous pro-recycling lobby, while also critical of deficiencies in government policy, argued that not enough was being done, that local authorities should introduce tougher measures to make citizens more responsive, that the recycling initiatives were misguided because they directed attention from the real culprits (e.g. the manufacturers and suppliers of plastic packaging) and so on. Some closely allied events that caught the public (and media) imagination at the time included the following: the arrest of a woman in Dorset for (persistently) putting non-recyclable materials into her recycling boxes, the discovery that newly issued waste containers (wheelie bins) contained microchips for weighing and evaluating householders’ rubbish (giving rise to fears about surveillance and ‘bin brother’), news stories about ‘rubbish rage’ (assaults on binmen by householders, the latter furious that their large sofa, for example, was not collected when left outside their house) and the appointment, by local councils, of ‘recycling monitors’ – individuals employed by local councils to patrol and inspect recycling activities by householders – thus further exacerbating fears of surveillance.

As indicated earlier, a key aspect of the shift from epistemology to ontology is to eschew standard recourse to ‘context’ – the invocation of overarching conditions, wider picture circumstances, origins and bases to account for the highly charged moral outrage of these examples – in favour of attention to ontological enactment. Suffice it to say that it is easy to wrap up the whole ‘wrong bin bag’ story within various narratives about the continued, persistent interference of government and councils, the nanny state, an increasing climate of government by coercion, the growing emphasis on the need for individuals to take more responsibility for their own actions and so on. Instead, our interest here is to consider the practices that enable the mutual constitution of the properties of the entities involved and the relevance of the context in which they are situated (see Figure 1).

**The Text**

1. ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER POTTY PENALTY
2. Fined £50 for using WRONG bin bags
   [Pictures of Lynette with caption:]
3. Stunned … Lynette with her own bag and daft penalty notice

4. By LYNDSEY WEATHERALL

5. Barmy Council bosses have fined a woman £50 for putting her rubbish out in the WRONG KIND of bin bags.

6. Lynette Vickers got into trouble after she ran out of council-issued sacks.
7. So she put her trash in her OWN black sacks instead and left them out the night before collection day.
8. But they were spotted by two over-zealous wardens who ripped them open to find out who they belonged to, then hammered on Lynette’s door.
The unmarried mum of four was stunned when told she was being fined £50 for using the wrong bags and causing an obstruction.

It is the latest in a catalogue of crazy penalties being introduced by the council bosses.

**Figure 1.** Another Day, Another Potty Penalty (The Sun, 27th January 2004. Also available at http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/143750/Rubbish-fine-madness.html - accessed 4 May 2013).

11. The unmarried mum of four was stunned when told she was being fined £50 for using the wrong bags and causing an obstruction.
12. It is the latest in a catalogue of crazy penalties being introduced by the
14. Government and councils in recent months.
15. Lynette is refusing to pay the penalty and has been warned she faces a court fine
16. of up to £2,500.
17. Lynette, 36, of Crewe, Cheshire said last night: ‘It’s absolutely ridiculous.
18. ‘I thought I was being stitched up when the wardens knocked on my door. I had
19. no option but to put the extra rubbish out in bags. There was no way they were
20. causing an obstruction.
21. ‘I’m not paying the fine. They can take me to court if they want but it’s stupid.’
22. The madness came about because of a delayed collection over the festive period.
23. Lynette had to wait ten days – between December 29 and January 8 – for the
dustmen to do their rounds.
24. Like any normal family, she had a lot of extra garbage.
25. But a notice placed on her wheelie bin said extra bags WOULD be taken.

27. Dumping

28. So Lynette put her rubbish in four of her own bags and tied them up.
29. Just before 7pm on January 7, she took them to the edge of the road for collection
30. at 8am the next day.
31. But within minutes a warden was on her doorstep.
32. Lynette added: ‘She had opened all the bags to see if she could find where they
33. had come from. Then she was on my doorstep saying I was being fined. It was
34. crazy.’
35. The pre-printed penalty notice says the fine is for an ‘offence of leaving litter’.
36. The warden had added that the fine is also for ‘the dumping of rubbish on the
37. grassed area’
38. Lynette phoned wardens boss Keith Boughey who insisted the decision was right.
39. She said: ‘He said I was being fined because I hadn’t put the rubbish in council
40. bin bags. I said I hadn’t been left any, so then he said it was because I had too
41. many bags and they were causing an obstruction.’
42. Lynette had to re-bag the rubbish and put it out next day. To add to the craziness,
43. the binmen were happy to take away ALL of Lynette’s rubbish, plus her
44. Christmas tree.
45. The angry mum added: ‘I have kids to feed and clothe. Fifty pounds is a lot of
46. money to families like us. I’m all for the wardens stopping litterbugs – but I’m not
47. one of them.
48. Wardens for Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council have already been
49. condemned for fining a woman for littering when she was feeding birds.
50. Mr Boughey insists Lynette is in the wrong. He said: ‘I am standing by the
51. decision. We don’t collect bags in areas with wheelie bins, unless there has been a
52. missed collection and the rubbish is in a council bag.’

53. The Sun Says – Page Eight

How can we get at the processes of ontological enactment of the entities involved in this
story? We draw here on the work of Dorothy Smith (1990, 2001), who argues that the
organization of texts is isomorphic with the conceptual schema used to make sense of it.
Smith speaks of the ways in which discursive organization makes possible ‘the relations
of ruling’. By analogy, we are interested in looking closely at this newspaper story for what its organization tells us about the relations of governance with respect to ordinary objects.

This isomorphism between the organization of texts and the ‘relations of ruling’ is not just a matter of spatial arrangement – where on the page items, things or descriptions appear – although this does turn out to be of incidental importance. Rather, we take it that organization here refers primarily to the ways in which the text depicts the character of the entities mentioned and, crucially, of the ways in which they relate to each other. The organization of texts, thus, is to be inspected for the ways in which it makes available a cast of relevant characters, assigns attributes to each and depicts the network of rights and responsibilities that characterize the situation at hand. In short, the organization of the text is to be understood as enacting a moral universe comprising all its constituent elements. In this case, the text tells us who and what is on the scene, who should do what, what might be expected to result, who is liable for what, who did what and whether and how that is legitimate or otherwise.

At the heart of the story is the figure of the bin bag, the common or garden-variety black plastic bag that features in the main photograph (see Figure 1). In the story, it is rendered as an obviously ordinary and perfectly adequate object around which a series of absurd council actions have taken place. This raises some interesting initial questions. Of all the things that can be contentious and that could be fought over, why this bag? (cf. Diprose, 2010). Can a (mere) bag disrupt political relations? What, to coin a phrase, are the conditions of possibility whereby a bag can become an event? Above all, and most starkly, how can a bin bag be ‘wrong’?

A noticeable feature of the story is its organization in terms of an additive contrast structure between two main classes of entity. The central contrast here is between what Lee (1984) might call ‘Evil Doers’ and ‘Innocent Victims’, in this case between people such as the barmy council bosses and normal individuals like the woman Lynette. This contrast is introduced early on: ‘Barmy council bosses have fined a woman £50 …’ (Line 5). This contrast is then restated and elaborated as the text unfolds. Indeed, in the way Smith suggests, this contrast acts as an important preliminary instruction to the reader for making sense of the text. It provides an opposition that can be used to make sense of, to categorize, the actions and entities mentioned in the subsequent text. The cast of characters associated with the ‘barmies’ turns out to include ‘over-zealous wardens’ (9), ‘the government and councils’ (13/14), ‘the wardens’ (18), ‘a warden’ (31), ‘the warden’ (36), ‘wardens [sic] boss Keith Boughey’ (38), ‘he’ (39), ‘the binmen’ (43), ‘Wardens for Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council’ (48) and ‘Mr Boughey’ (50). The cast of characters associated with the ‘normals’ includes ‘Lynette’ (3, 10, 15, 23, 32, 38, 42, 50), ‘a woman’ (5), ‘Lynette Vickers’ (6), ‘an unmarried mum of four’ (11), and curiously, ‘a woman (fined) for littering when she was feeding birds’ (49).

This key contrast between categories is reiterated and reinforced throughout. It is elaborated through the depiction of various activities and attributes that can be understood, by and large, both to be in keeping with, and to reaffirm, the dualistic typology being mooted.

So far so good. And so far, by and large, in keeping with Smith’s innovative analysis of the relations of ruling. Roughly speaking, the actions and attitudes of members of the
class of ‘barmies’ are in a denigratory relation with those of the ‘normals’. The contrast structure provides for the unfairness of the relation between the two classes. Thus, over-zealous wardens enjoy a pre-eminent relation of ruling over people like an unmarried mum of four: ‘Lynette Vickers got into trouble …’ (6). However, an important extension to Smith’s scheme is to notice how the relations between these elements are constituted in relation to the entities in the story. In particular, the contrast between barmies and normals is played out in relation to (what we take as) their contrasting dealings with the objects at the heart of the story. Moreover, the organization of the text makes possible the very sameness of the objects throughout. Different things are being done, said, assumed, assessed and so on, in relation to the very same thing. That the object of barmies and normals is indeed a singular thing is critical in sustaining that contrast: the contradiction would have been considerably mitigated, and the political charge of the episode altered, if the text had encouraged an alternative ‘ontological’ reading, that is, if the organization of the text had provided for the possibility that both sides were referring to different bin bags.

Now comes the killer move. The contrast structure provides that barmies and normals perform completely different actions in relation to the same thing. However, it additionally turns out that the thing’s character is such that only the actions of the normals are appropriate towards it. It is, after all, just a black bin bag! Appropriate actions are those of normals who recognize the bag for what it actually is. It is the very ordinariness of the bag that legitimates the actions of the normals towards it. That ordinariness achieves, in virtue of the contrast structure that divides the two great camps, the oddity, inappropriateness and downright bizarre behaviour of the barmies.

Crucially, then, we see that this is not just a story woven around acceptable or curious behaviours in relation to a given object. Instead, the very character of the object, the ontology of the bin bag, is constituted in and through its articulation, in this case, through the organization of the text. In particular, we see that the mundanity of the bin bag is not given; it is instead achieved in virtue of its articulation as part of the structure of the moral order of which it is part. The mundanity of the bin bag – what every reasonable (normal) person knows about the nature and purpose of bin bags – reinforces the moral contrast between barmies and normals. So what the thing is, what it is for, what should be in it and what is (in)appropriate behaviour towards it are all tied to (and exemplify) the structure of the moral order.

In addition, notice here how features of the story’s organization achieve the formulation of ‘its’ context. For example, the story offers that the whole daft episode can be made sense of by placing it in the context of a series of similar episodes and actions. ‘Another Day, another potty penalty’ (1) provides a preliminary instruction that the content of the report can be read as part of a collection of similar occurrences. The item is to be read, in other words, as the same kind of item as other members of an available collection. This collection suggests that this same thing has happened on other occasions, and possibly so frequently as to be a daily occurrence! And it is indeed the same kind of episode (another potty penalty), or perhaps even an identical incident, or at least sufficiently similar to include them all in the same series of events, being just one incident in an un-enumerated series of similar incidents. Moreover, important to this is the extension of the contrast structure noted above. For ‘potty penalty’ can be read as an action, vested
upon hapless innocents, which performs the pair parts of perpetrators and victims of the penalty, and this pair maps onto the contrast between barmies and normals. In this way, the availability of the collection, together with its adequacy as a relevant collection of which the new episode is an appropriate member, provides for a reading of ‘the context’.

In sum, the example suggests that understanding the politics involved requires us to take seriously the accomplished ontology of entities (objects, technologies and persons). In this view, entities are not given, but rather offer a reference point for temporary imputations of moral orders of accountability (‘it could be otherwise’). This means that the normative significance of an ontological approach is much more than a matter of how to behave in relation to familiar, given, common objects. Instead, it requires that we treat entities as themselves a form of ontological enactment.

More than this, the importance of the ontological work is that it sustains the singularity of the object at the heart of the discussion. The proposition that barmies and normals hold contrasting views at all depends on establishing and maintaining that the entity at the heart of the discussion is just the thing that it is: the contrasting views are contrasting views of the same thing. This point resonates with Pollner’s (1978) ontologically inflected analysis of mundane reasoning in traffic courts, where witnesses are interrogated as to the speed of the car driven by the defendant. Pollner suggests that the whole proceedings are organized so as to maintain the key supposition that a car cannot be travelling at both 30 mile/hour and 60 mile/hour at the same time. It also echoes Garfinkel’s (2002) much misunderstood promotion of the notion of quiddity. The proper target for social science inquiry, in his view, is to interrogate the whatness of things, to understand how entities come to seem what they are, not just to ironicise differences in perceptions (treatments, interpretations, meanings etc.) of those entities.

Now, it might be observed that the above analysis of the ontological politics of the bin bag is based on a particularly ‘discursive’ or ‘textual’ source, namely, the journalistic inscriptions of a newspaper article (and a tabloid newspaper at that!). So it is important to emphasize that the ‘textual’ in ‘textual analysis’ does not entail any lesser capacity for ontological enactment. In particular, our use of ‘textual’ refers specifically, and in the technical sense in which it is used by Smith (1978), to the organization of any collection of constituent elements that is subject to multiple interpretations and uses. Two consequences follow. First, our use of ‘text’ should not be confused with evaluations of the relative solidity or effectiveness of different kinds of artefacts. In this latter, vernacular usage of the term, some authors have been tempted to depict certain kinds of artefact as ‘merely’ textual, or ‘purely’ discursive, with the implication that some kinds of element could possibly be non-textual (i.e. non-interpretable).13 Second, and relatedly, this technical sense of ‘text’ makes available for analysis a whole series of artefacts that are not thought to exhibit ‘textual’ qualities in the common sense use of the term: buildings, technologies, architecture, sayings, songs, tunes and so on.

**Rethinking politics through ontology**

Let us then return to our questions about the normative and political implications of ontological enactment. We can think of the whole wrong bin bag episode as one of ontological
politics. The wrong bin bag is a struggle over what after all is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in relation to what the thing actually is and who or what should act in what ways towards it. It is a story of politics in which the ontological status of the various entities is up for grabs. However, it is also a story wherein the possibility of politics involves attempts to establish ontological singularity. Whereas in most recent discussions of ontological enactment ontological politics is linked to a certain kind of multiplicity – the differential enactment of distinct entities is indicative of the operation of politics – the wrong bin bag suggests how politics, understood here as the encounter and conflict between different ways of being in the world, arise with respect to the assertion that there can only be one singular ontology. The claim that the bin bag can only be what it obviously is, makes possible, and goes hand in hand with, the denigration of other ‘versions’ of the bag as motivated, influenced, socially informed and, in short, political.

Clearly, the kind of politics being suggested here has profound implications. It implies the need to problematize previously taken-for-granted statuses of humans, non-humans, objects, technologies and matter. It implies that we reconsider the ways in which ideas like agency, ontology, materiality and representation are interlinked. Moreover, changes in our ways of thinking about these things may necessitate a new approach to understanding the nature of the political subject/object, perhaps even a change in our thinking about the nature of politics.

In the traditional view of politics advanced by political theory, the ontological status of the entities in question is largely given. The point at issue is the nature of the relationships between given, stable, figures – that is, between the given and (largely) known persons or things, humans or non-humans and so on. The familiar political questions are who holds power over what and whom. What kinds of political institution enable which kinds of involvement by whom in the distribution of resources? In other words, ontology provides the taken-for-granted foundation for the elucidation of the questions that are proper to political theory, ‘an external ground in relation to which ethical and political life gain their sense of what is right’ (White, 2000: 6).

In the more insistent STS view that we develop here, the ontological status of the entities involved is an accomplishment. That is, the status is not assumed as given and is possibly in a state of continual flux. Note here that this is much more than merely saying that (fixed) non-humans deserve a voice alongside (fixed) humans. For one thing, it is by no means clear what distinguishes human from non-human in this sort of account. In addition, the identity of all entities, their capacities, attributes, responsibilities, expectations and so on is up for grabs. Determinations of these identities are achievements (Stengers, 2011). They are the (temporary) upshot of practices, interactions and interventions. So the position we are advocating here is worse, in a way, than merely calling for the (re)enfranchisement of non-humans. It insists that the political constitution of humans and non-humans is in the very constitution of these entities in those terms (human and non-human). Ontological politics are quite clearly at the heart of the matter.

At this point, we should reflect briefly on the well-known (albeit dated) STS slogan that technology ‘is politics by other means’ (Latour, 1988). For our purposes, we would willingly sign up to the slogan that ‘objects are (also) politics by other means’, or better, that ‘entities are also politics by other means’. However, it is important to recognize that the same slogan admits two subtly different interpretations: the restricted and
the expansive. The more restricted interpretation of this slogan is the injunction to understand that technologies and objects are being used to pursue a kind of politics with which we are familiar. A well-known example from the philosophy of technology is the claim that artefacts have politics (e.g. Winner, 1999). In Winner’s view, for example, Robert Moses’ bridges are artefacts that contain (and also conceal) the racist and elitist politics of their architect designer. Winner suggests that this is the architect Moses’ (allegedly) surreptitious way of bringing political effects to bear. Leaving aside, for the moment, the other problems with this proposition (see Cooper and Woolgar, 1999; Marres and Lezaun, 2011), our point is that this perspective needs re-specifying.

The re-specified, more expansive interpretation of the slogan is that entities of all kinds are ‘doing’ a different kind of politics. The standard conception of politics as compromising power and racist (or gender, ideological etc.) bias is now augmented, in this more expansive interpretation, by the politics of ontological constitution. What are the attributes of the bridge, what are its effects, how is it apprehended, indeed, that it counts as a bridge at all, are all the upshot of ontological politics. Moreover, this opening of the ontological constitution of the bridge goes hand in hand with the ontological constitution of other entities brought into potential relation with the thing. Who and what are the users of the bridge? The buses? What are these buses, how and by whom were they designed, tested, commissioned, how tall are they, what kinds and how many entities do the buses ‘carry’? Does the constellation of carried entities include people, adults, children, dogs, other pets, luggage, dirt, germs? When conjured into ontological being, each of these is potentially consequential for the political effect of the operation of the buses. Is any kind of person allowed? Are persons in any kind of condition permitted to travel? So what exactly are the kinds of entities that the buses ‘carry’? It is not so much that ‘technology is politics by other means’ as it is that ‘entities are politics by other means’.

Finally, to what extent can we as analysts claim to have been involved in world-making or to have ‘interfered’ in the ontological politics of the bin bag? Relatedly, to what extent should we feel obliged to infer – for the reason hinted earlier – that examination at the level of ontology is no longer just about perspectives on the world, but now concerns the very constitution of the world? We find it difficult to respond decisively to these questions. In line with the basic aspirations common to all ‘critical’ analyses, we hope that our analysis might have some kind of effect, that minimally it might, for example, suggest ways of looking differently at arguments and debates about ‘ordinary’ objects, that it might bring the critical sensibilities of STS deeper into the seemingly ordered realities of mundane life. However, we would need to undertake a considerable articulation of the relevant stakes and stakeholders before being able to claim the possibility of interference, let alone the necessity of engaging in this way.

**Conclusion**

What then is the import for STS of attending to the ontological? We have seen that the recent focus on ontology in STS entails five key characteristics. First, it is a professed move away from, and beyond, epistemology. The object of inquiry is the very existence or being of entities, not merely the modes of knowing pre-existing entities. Second,
however, we have suggested that the distinction between epistemology and ontology is rarely clear-cut in STS. The avowed ‘turn to ontology’ is thus best understood as a way of intensifying the provocative power of STS perspectives. Third, the ontological tendency in STS is empirical or even experimental. In line with established traditions of STS inquiry, the emphasis is on showing how in practice, and in detail, particular ontologies are achieved. Fourth, a key term in the accomplishment of ontologies is enactment. This underscores the unwillingness of STS to accept phenomena as given, but gives rise to certain difficulties about the specificity (and vice versa) of the term. Fifth, the notion of ontological politics raises questions about the normative implications of a turn to ontology. To what extent does this renewed focus on ontology entail commitments that take us beyond the long established deflationary stances of sceptical STS?

Our example of the ‘wrong bin bag’ illustrated and explored some of these key moves, taking the opportunity, in particular, to assess (implicit) claims that an empirically oriented focus on ontological enactment offers a superior mode of analysis in STS. Of particular interest to us is the observation that the ‘politics’ invoked in this example – the possibility of contrast and conflict – depended on the achievement of ontological singularity. Whereas the emphasis to date has been on ontological multiplicity as the root of a particularly intense form of political incommensurability, our modest example suggests the value associated with a singularized world, the kind of world in which it should be possible to take for granted the blatant ordinariness of a mere bin bag, as the source of radical (and scandalous) difference (cf. Lezaun, 2010).

What this example suggests, and what our reading of the STS literature indicates, is that the ‘turn to ontology’ should not be seen as a way of grounding the empirical study of practices in a theory of ‘what there is’. Rather than implying a commitment to a certain perspective on difference, materiality or politics, our field’s current curiosity about ontologies and their enactment is best understood as a way of extending its idiosyncratic critical sensibility – an appreciation of fluidity in seemingly stable entities, a recognition of difference beyond claims to singularity (and vice versa), a reluctance to take the world at face value – to the realm of the ready-made, to the world of those entities whose being might seem most unproblematic and ordinary.

Acknowledgements

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Notes
1. Matei Candea has made a similar argument about the relationship between ‘ontology’ and ‘culture’ in anthropology (see Carrithers et al., 2010).
2. For a clear exposition of the subtleties of the epistemology–ontology distinction in STS, and a reminder of the difficulty of drawing univocal and unidirectional transitions from one to the other, see Ian Hacking’s (2002) differentiation of his own ‘historical ontology’ from Loraine Daston’s ‘historical meta-epistemology’ (p. 8–9).
3. This section follows Woolgar (2012).
4. ‘Ironic’ in the technical sense that the analytic stance claims that the object is other than it appears to be.
5. A similar point is made by Pollner (1978) in his well-known critique of labelling theory. The emphasis given by some sociologists to the attachment of labels to actions and objects, especially in the sociology of deviance, overlooks the importance of how these are constituted as actions and objects in the first place.
6. An interesting but not yet well-understood issue is the extent to which the STS author, in rendering distinct entities as having the potential for coordination, herself contributes to this coordination work.
7. This example is taken from Woolgar and Neyland (2013).
8. This contrasts with some ‘high church’ approaches to conversational analysis, which hold that since a definitive specification of prevailing context is impossible, it has no legitimate place in the analysis.
9. The layout here inevitably misses the full iconography of the text as it appeared in the newspaper (see Figure 1). In this layout, we have transposed the emphases, in bold and capitals, and the italics.
10. This last line links to the Editorial column of the newspaper, Fine Mess. Just when you thought the jobsworths couldn’t get any barmier … Along come the rubbish wardens of Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council. With small minds and empty hearts, they fine a family £50 for putting their Christmas rubbish into the wrong kind of bags. What pettifogging, curmudgeonly, toe-curling stupidity. Angry Lynette Vickers is right to tell the council to go to hell. She should file the council’s letters where they belong.
11. In Smith’s (1978) ‘K is mentally ill’, reliable witnesses are those who, in contrast to K herself, recognize the facts of the matter, that is K’s illness, as stated at the outset.
12. Relatedly, we see that the text provides for differences that (do not) make a difference. The organization of the text makes possible that the black bin bag is different from the council approved bag, but that difference is minimized as obviously and evidently trivial. The two bags are presented as practically and morally equivalent, and the failure to recognize this is presented as characteristic of the response of the barmies.
13. A well-known example is Latour’s (1992) declaration that the material technology of a seat belt is more effective in restraining the child than the mere ‘text’ of his father’s voice.
14. White’s (2000) defence of a ‘weak ontological turn’ in political theory resonates with much of what we have argued here. What characterizes a ‘weak ontology’, he writes, is that ‘its elaboration of fundamental meanings must in some sense fold back upon itself, disrupting its own smooth constitution of a unity. In a way, its contestability will thus be enacted rather than just announced’ (p. 8).
Winner argues that the bridges built by Moses on the parkways on Long Island were too low to allow the passage of buses. Since poor people and blacks were dependent on this public transport, they were excluded from access to Jones Beach, Moses’ highly acclaimed public park. Winner derives his argument from Robert Caro’s (1974) famous biography of Robert Moses, *The Power Broker*.

**References**


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