



Whose Passion?*

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review of:

Bruno Latour (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (HB: pp. 320, £30.00, ISBN: 978-0-19-925604-4)

Introduction

Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) has been around for quite a while now and has successfully created a field in which fascinating work has been produced. Despite its controversial nature, people like Wiebe Bijker, John Law, Annemarie Mol and many more within this field have shown the strength of ANT by creating very practical and insightful accounts of social practices, usually focusing on technological innovations and the ways those innovations become social in an entanglement of both human and non-human actors. A trio consisting of Michel Callon, John Law and Bruno Latour has produced and popularized a major part of the descriptions of ANT as well as developed its implications for social theory. Latour in particular abstracted the ANT critique of social studies from its roots in STS and (economic) interaction and developed it into a generalized idea of what a practical social science should look like. It fits that, after some excursions into democracy and green politics, Latour presents us with a book on the basics of ANT. The book is presented as a textbook on ANT, but the wider goal of the book is nothing less than to redefine the notion of the 'social' and to pit ANT polemically against the more traditional, deductive versions of doing social science.

The book is set up as a textbook in two parts plus an interlude. Part one aims to show what kind of general issues arise when ANT is deployed; part two talks about the reception of ANT in a wider context; and the interlude works as a synopsis of the book, in which Latour opposes a view of ANT as a simple method to confirm previously existing theories and positions of agents. Instead of taking both 'actors' and 'networks' literally, Latour wants to stay with the possibility of creating multiple types of

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connections. For Latour, the typical end-result of social studies today only serves to confirm what social scientists were looking for: the existence of 'the social'. This is the result of a debate between Tarde and Durkheim that was fought and won by Durkheim when sociology was conceived. To be schematic, Durkheim wanted a science of 'the social', and sought a deductive idea of what laws govern human behaviour, while Tarde championed a far more inductive way of approaching the field, which would mean staying at the micro-level while studying connections and postponing judgement. This allows the researcher to study more sorts of connections than just human interactions and thereby produces a different kind of 'social' than we use in sociology today. Favouring Tarde rather than Durkheim, Latour sets out to inductively explore how all sorts of connections are actually made. These connections involve the activity of various sorts of actors. These actors are not necessarily human, therefore connections can be found in 'assemblages' of human and non-human actors, which can then be traced in order to produce a 'sociology of associations'.

Latour's ANT is ideally a performative science of how assemblages come into being, of what different kinds of actors do. Rather than trying to find 'social forces' and thereby creating an incessant re-application and re-finding of what 'the social' theoretically already is, ANT is the study of interactions and the way in which networks form themselves by drawing in or mobilizing different sorts of actors in particular ways, and how that works to enable or disable the potential agency of those actors. The centre(s) of power and the actors able to speak for other actors from the position of an obligatory point of passage do not necessarily stay the same. The network in action creates its own dynamic, which means that actors change form, shape and position, and cannot rest assured of what or where they are to whom. Actors themselves can only be understood as being something in particular and having a particular kind of agency as a result of the network shape and history at a given time. This means that ANT posits that actors in an actor-network can be more and less than human beings alone.

Method

The point of departure for Latour is threefold. First, in ANT research, non-humans have to be included as actors with an agency that is more open than traditional causality. By including non-human actors, Latour wants to move away from the privileging of humans in the study of the social. Therefore he starts by taking distance from what is considered routine. The 'black-boxing' of processes hides that possibilities for agency are framed by the inclusion of particular objects and technologies. In ANT-research, looking closely will expose how the possibilities for agency and the place in the network of agents are very much influenced by the inclusion of all kinds of non-human actants. These non-human actants do not just frame the possibilities for agency for human actors, they also attain a kind of agency for themselves.

The second point of departure is the expansion of the explanation of 'the social' to include such new actors and assemblages. Social forces are found in assemblages of concretely studied actants, not in anonymous social forces. It is the task of ANT to constantly re-study the assemblages that are formed, the constructions as they are made,

rather than to arrive at a fixed point where the creating forces can be made to disappear. To do ANT research, we have to stay with the local, with 'thick description', with the actors themselves: "when faced with an object, attend first to the associations out of which it's made and only later look at how it has renewed the repertoire of social ties" (p. 233). For this reason, there's a constant insistence on the study of action, of what becomes a social actant, rather than the revelation of grand power relations or social forces behind the activity. As Latour states: "there is only science of the particular" (p. 137).

This approach puts ANT in a position where any definition of groups can only be performative. It is important to listen to how actors engage with other agents to form a social world and have their own theories of action. The aim for the researcher is to follow the actors moving about in their worlds and to follow their self-defined actions and categories rather than have them speak into our preconceived categories. Agency can be studied through the surrounding controversies, what is being done and the figuration in its many guises. The proportion of actors that are allowed to speak for themselves and the amount of energy, movement and specificity captured are the benchmarks for a good ANT-account.

The third point of departure is the task of reassembling those findings with all the new forms of assemblies into some version of the social. According to Latour, what is gained by any explanation that starts by looking for social interactions is only an explanation of the mysterious force that is called 'the social': it creates a loop without adding knowledge. This kind of positivism is wrong because it hasn't done its job right. Durkheimian versions of social science have to reinforce their premature political conclusions endlessly by holding on to specific versions of 'the social', rather than going back to studying social interactions themselves. They have been acting too fast and without due process, trying to blur the distinction between multiplicity and unification too quickly. The reason for holding on to such a deductive approach in traditional sociology is political. It wants to form the social world at the same time as it is studying it: "The problem is that the social sciences have never dared to really be empirical because they believed that they simultaneously had to engage in the task of modernization" (p. 241). This is especially true for critical sociology: "the problem of critical sociology is that it can never fail to be right" (p. 249).

In Part Two, Latour addresses the wider background of his version of sociology. The social is put forward as a construction, a political representation and a reified substance all at the same time. Latour's main argument is that scale is not to be inserted by scientists, but should be the result of what actors do. We should stay open for a multiplicity that allows us to see our actors as actors, rather than placeholders, generic agents, nodes existing to uphold the structure of a pre-defined system that we are deductively proving or disproving to be true.

Networks of Passion

Up until here, Latour's account of ANT is mainly an epistemological project involving a return to an inductive sort of science of the social. Latour's emphasis on inductive science works as a continuous effort to remind us of how to do proper research. However, the attack he simultaneously stages on interpretative sociology and phenomenology for placing emphasis on humans as the only beings that can exhibit intentional behaviour is not so promising. Latour attacks the prioritizing of the human(ist) intentional subject in interpretative sociology, because a focus on humans and intention will not automatically bring life, richness and 'humanity' to research. He argues that we should look closely at every kind of construction that inhabits our world(s). A 'lived world' is the world that we co-inhabit with the actants that we find in these constructions. 'Agency' and 'intentionality' cannot be limited to humans alone then. Non-human actors start to play a decisive role as well. For Latour, this means we move away from a metaphysics, an epistemology and a version of politics that takes only human actors into account.

This critique is understandable in so far as it is the prioritizing of one metaphysics, one privileged viewpoint. It works, as long as it is clear that he is talking only about epistemology. But Latour creates a mix of his performative approach towards research methodology and his aggregate ontological vision of what actors are. This pulls subjectivity into his network. For Latour "[s]ubjectivity is not a property of human souls but of the gathering itself – provided it lasts of course" (p. 218). In other words, subjectivity can be understood as a property of *any* particular gathering and can be applied to a world of quasi-objects with (emotional) attachments that can communicate. It is here that things start to slip in his argument.

Words like 'passion' and 'interests' become placeholders for different versions of subjectivity. Latour uses them in four ways: first, as motivation to open up epistemology to more actants and performative science in the epistemology of ANT; second, as interestedness of the researcher to study the why and how of the forming and moving around of assemblages to base a concrete political view; third, as a way of understanding the new constructions between objects and humans as new ways of subjectivity carried by the network; and fourth, by reinjecting this new actant-subjectivity into the research community (making researchers into actants, too). By using 'passions' on these four levels at once, Latour's idea of the subjectivity of actants in ANT keeps oscillating between humans as researchers, actant-networks, and the relation between researchers and actant-networks as the focal point. This means it becomes impossible to point to any actor which is acting in the research in a specific capacity.

The lack of distinguishing between these versions of subjectivity introduces a needlessly defensive stance towards phenomenological ideas of intentionality and agency. ANT constantly recalibrates the object of research between (a) the network under surveillance; (b) the specific subset (assemblage) that has a specific sort of agency and (c) the specific actants within that network it is focusing on. Latour has a tendency to treat the actants at level (c) as reified 'beings'. This makes it possible to stop the process and take interesting subsets and resulting actants 'out of the flow'. But

it also means we are then studying these actants as aggregate constituent components of a particular assemblage and as placeholders of the agency of the network as a whole at the same time. This is problematic because it uses two different kinds of system definitions with mutually exclusive forms of subjectivity.

In the first definition, Latour looks at the conglomerate, emergent agency of the network itself. In this version, it is not the actants, but rather the actants as nodes within the network that are under scrutiny. These actants function as nodes that are constituent for the kind of intentionality that the network as a whole exhibits. The conglomerate version of a network cannot allow for more than agency for the nodes that supports it. This agency emerges as a result of a specific network configuration that only indirectly bestows specific forms of agency to nodes and configurations of nodes within that network. Whether those nodes are human or non-human doesn't really matter, since they are only constitutive of the network and its agency. The fact that the nodes or configurations acquire their own agency does not mean that they will have that sort of agency by themselves outside of the network.

In the second definition, Latour uses the aggregate version of the network as a bottom-up construction of parts in which it is possible to make a cut at a specific point and find a level of aggregation that can support actants as actors-for-themselves. It is only when we transform actants from nodes or assemblages within the larger network into reified actants-for-themselves that passion shows itself. When actants are taken out of the network as actants in their own right, speaking and acting for themselves, these actants are reified enough to acquire intentionality. The actants then automatically attain a status on the same level as the network we were researching before and replace the network as the carrier of intentionality.

The difference between intentionality and agency for actants is a function of the specific cut we make. Not making this distinction explains why actants or assemblies created are no longer entities under research for Latour, but become the basis for a new sort of ethics and ontology and start to replace existing ideas of 'the human'. The subjectivity that was first emergent as a property of the network is functionally replaced by the subjectivity of the actant and this version of subjectivity is silently re-applied to the actants within the new, aggregate network. Understanding the passions and emotions of actants can then be done by looking at their new, reified configurations within the aggregate network. This new network is a function of the actant, and no longer the network we were researching originally.

Latour also uses 'passion' and the importance of the 'quality of gathering' and of 'attachment' as a standard for the epistemological worth of the research. The quality of the attachment between the researcher and the 'social puppet' researched means that "the strings of research can transport autonomy or enslavement" (p. 218). By making 'autonomy' or 'enslavement' of the actant a function of the actions of the researcher, the researcher is drawn into the network as a producer of qualitative sorts of relations. The subjectivity of the network now applies to the researchers and their communities as well. It seems that Latour wants his actants to escape from the carefully constructed focus on performative science to include the researchers and the research community.

The study of the characteristics of such new actor-network-researcher networks potentially leads to an infinite regress.

The question about actor-networks and the methodology of ANT, therefore, is: whose passions do we talk about at what specific moment?

Discussion

At least now nobody can complain that the project of actor-network-theory has not been systematically presented. I have voluntarily made it such an easy target that is sharpshooter is not needed in order to hit it. (p. 262)

As stated, Latour has succeeded in providing a sharp and detailed account that makes both strengths and weaknesses of ANT visible. For that, he should be lauded, but it does not take away that some constructive criticism might be in place.

With regards to Latour's insistence on the epistemological strength of the programme, he would perhaps be better off to stay with the point that actants are actants that have to be composed within research. Actants have to be assembled from their own actions; they are not given, complete actors at the outset. The level of aggregation that we work with is usually supplied by the cut that is made at one specific moment in the system under observation. In other words, the calibration that we apply to our research and the point at which we zoom in is constitutive for the intentionality the node, actant or assemblage acquires in its new configuration as an actant-for-itself. Still, they are primarily objects within research and have to be seen as such, just like classical objects of research.

If actants are not natural carriers of passion, it seems that the network as such can only be understood as imbued with 'passion' and 'love' by humans researching that actor-network. It might then occur that Latour's 'conduits' are not what 'allows us' to become an individual and to gain some interiority. Rather, his 'conduits' are what makes this happen a bit more in a research methodology for actants within the research. Also, it's not the individual spirit, which would wither for an absence of love in research as Latour claims: it's the researched spirit at best. Lastly, rather than the abstract potentiality for actants to be actualized in the world at large, 'potentiality' could just mean an enlargement for the understanding of actants as more than just human actors and more room for those actants to speak and inhabit their particular world. In this way, ANT retains its value as a call to arms for an inductive approach to social science, but the critique on the primacy of intentionality in humans might be eased a bit.

Insistence on performative science, and harsh words towards the deductive approach, make Latour rightfully susceptible to the accusation of being anti-historical and anti-political. His approach does run the risk of de-historicizing, of losing track of structure and what has been learned before, which can result in forgetting of what has been learned before, and in a lack of feeling for obstructions. This shows itself when Latour explains how ANT is all about the opportunity that the research should have to fail. However much the moral superiority of that position is appreciated, the expectation of

endless resources, the willingness to include all types of actors, and the willingness to have a project fail is stretching the possibilities of modern academia. Going on stressing practicalities, it might be obvious that the book, as an introduction to ANT, would have been served with some more advice and the inclusion of at least some ANT-case studies to show what the strength of ANT is in practice.

There is a rather central problem with Latour's account of ANT, which is that it is a ship flying very many flags. If we accept Latour as its only spokesperson (he says it's a school of one), ANT is a current and a new stream of epistemological thinking, next to Science and Technology Studies. It is also an application or a methodology, which is not deconstructive or in opposition to existing thinking. Finally, it is a revision and a critique of ontological thinking in existing science by attempting to have different kinds of actants accepted as possible agents in social research.

This shows itself when Latour is looking for a new overarching position, a sociology that will answer to his dreams of unifying social science under the flag of performative research. In an answer to attacks on the anti-political nature of ANT-research, Latour posits that politics can only have meaning in a world where differences can be tracked and explored, not an ideology which sets out to find what it has already stated in advance. Latour thinks "critical proximity, not critical distance, is what we should aim for" (p. 253). The freshness of the results, rather than generalized position or cheap calls for social action, will guarantee ANT's ethical and political relevance. However, in the end "sociology, contrary to its sister anthropology, can never be content with a plurality of metaphysics; it also needs to tackle the ontological question of the unity of this common world" (p. 259).

ANT wants to produce some version of the social that is more than a plurality of metaphysical positions that are mutually exchangeable. As Latour says: "It is one thing to claim that social scientists produce written accounts...it's quite another to conclude from this trite that we can only write fiction stories" (p. 126). The insistent emphasis on practical research, combined with the implied imperative not to talk about the grand questions lying behind them, leaves only a limited set of people who can actually discuss the direction of this approach in terms of its tenets and the question of 'the unity of this common world'. His insistence to eliminate power from the research methodology doesn't save Latour from invoking power-relations to keep the ship of ANT sailing. The theoretical openness and focus on performativity of ANT becomes immanently political at this point. The book could be read as an ANT research in itself: who gets thrown out, who is in favour and how does Latour manage to make himself an Obligatory Point of Passage?

Latour seems to be on the edge of saying something against somebody else on every page of the book. There is a long list of theoretical accusations and counteraccusations in this book, which have one thing in common: they all do not discuss practical research examples, but concern themselves only with epistemology and ontology *in abstracto*. Some of the most common adversaries include natural scientists (misrepresenting ANT-sociologists as simple story-tellers), direct colleagues (STS is not radical enough and sociologists are too obsessed with 'the social' and unproven 'social forces') and Anglo-Saxon scientists generally (for using critiques from ANT in a far too simplistic and

binary way) (note 179, p. 126). Latour provides a strong central position for himself here by pointing out interesting authors and leaving out all others, relegating them to the wider field of STS. Since the book presents itself as an introduction, rather than a discussion of positions, the insistence that power should be avoided as an item of study in the way networks come into being becomes a bit stale here.

Having said that, what remains admirable about this book is the thrust for a methodology that allows for other sorts of actors and for real, inductive accounts of what different versions of reality could harbour. It conveys a feeling that what Latour really wants to do is a version of ethnography with the inclusion of non-human actors. His insistence on sociology being a matter of hard work, postponing judgement and staying close to the world of the actants are very commendable. In this respect, his return to Tarde and the inductive method are a relief, and do provide an interesting way to go forward with social science. Combined with the possibilities that ANT offers and the great work it has produced, this book serves as an excellent entry into the basic questions surrounding this passionate approach to social science.

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