



Moving and mapping (with) Actor-Network Theory

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review of

Blok, A., Farías, I., & Roberts, C. (eds) (2019) *The Routledge Companion to Actor-Network Theory*, London: Routledge.
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Reading the introduction to the recent Routledge Companion to Actor-Network Theory reminded me of the famous phrase ‘The king is dead, long live the king’. The editors, Anders Blok, Ignacio Farías and Celia Roberts, begin by declaring that, after its heyday in the 1990s, ANT is now in danger of becoming irrelevant because it has been taken up by an increasing number of scholars with backgrounds in a wide range of disciplines. Its popularization, then, is depicted as compromising its analytical force. At the same time, the editors affirm that ANT continues to develop as an intellectual wellspring. Unlike in a kingdom and with kings, however, there is no rule that keeps ANT in circulation in the field of academia. Rather, and one could say *contrary* to many academic rules and traditional infrastructures of academic disciplines,

ANT prevails and spreads because its basic principles and sensitivities continue to inspire the articulation of research questions, methodological approaches and conceptual work in a wide range of disciplines. With 38 contributions, this book offers many intriguing examples of precisely how this is happening and how, in reality, ANT is itself challenged and transformed in these analytical encounters.

In the introduction, the editorial trio stresses that the purpose of the Companion is neither to develop a canonical version of contemporary ANT nor to provide a collection of current research that might suggest some sort of a 'genuine' way of doing ANT. Rather, and following in the footsteps of the most influential ANT thinkers, including Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, Annemarie Mol and John Law, they assert that ANT is neither a theory nor a method, it is instead an intellectual practice that requires constant re-examination and reinvention. The editors invite the readers to engage with ANT, take it as a companion, or choose to accompany it on its intellectual journeys, and to put its resources to work in their own research enterprises. Referring to the conceptual work of sociologist and urbanist AbdouMalik Simone (2014), who advocates the figure of the 'near South' to reframe standard geopolitical notions of 'North' and 'South', they term this proposed relation to ANT as 'modes of thinking and speaking *near* ANT, that is, not simply deploying the existing ANT canon of concepts, research strategies and writing experiments, but keeping them near as a source of questions, problems and inspiration' [xxii, italics added]. In this sense, the Companion is meant as much to probe future trajectories of ANT as it is to encourage their development and proliferation.

The book is divided into six sections, each carefully introduced by the editors. As they state in the introduction, they deliberately excluded the best-known luminaries of ANT as potential authors, approaching instead colleagues in their direct and distant research networks with questions about ANT in relation to specific issues and concerns. The result is a range of authors from Europe and indeed beyond, most academics with a background in anthropology or sociology, all committed to transcending disciplinary boundaries, who deliver concise yet elaborate statements. Below I review the Companion and its sections.

Refining ANT as a research paradigm

The chapters in the opening section discuss and suggest how ANT scholarship and its modes of inquiry can be built on to refine ANT as a research paradigm in the sense of Thomas Kuhn. In the first chapter, for instance, Daniel López-Gómez challenges the so-called ‘agnostic ANT repertoire’, in which ANT researchers limit themselves to problematising sociotechnical arrangements. In its place he advocates instead increased implementation of a ‘repertoire of care’. Tracing the pragmatic differences of the two repertoires, and building on recent debates on care in science and technology studies, he argues that a care repertoire would enable researchers to transform research situations of disconcertment into productive moments, not only for the purpose of developing concepts and methods further, but also for taking research as an opportunity to reshape the (perhaps otherwise neglected) arrangements of those involved in our studies. The second chapter, by Adrian Mackenzie, turns to the practices of making ANT concepts, presenting a rigorous meta-analysis of how such concepts are generally made to impact worlds and problems. By proposing the ‘conceptant’, a term that reveals concepts as actors, Mackenzie invites us, surprisingly, to compare the agency of ANT concepts with marmalade, seams, code repositories and backflips, in terms of their stickiness, empirical tightness, referentiality and mobility. Next, Brit Ross Winthereik enquires into the agency of concepts by advising their deliberate use as significant research participants or, employing Donna Haraway’s terminology, as ‘companion concepts’. Drawing on her fieldwork at an Energy Fair, Winthereik provides examples of how her research challenged the concepts of network and infrastructure and argues that such challenges of concepts should be used as a resource for the analysis, and should be subject to much the same scrutiny as the moves of other actors. In the next chapter, Atsuro Morita elaborates that ANT analysis might also profit from second order observation, by juxtaposing the researcher’s ways of drawing comparisons on those of the research participants. ‘Lateral comparison’, which is what he calls this analytical process, would serve to test ANT concepts and support the analysts in their quest to remain true to the multiplicity of knowledge practices.

The concluding three contributions in the section discuss the intellectual positioning of ANT projects. First, building on Michel Callon’s ANT studies on

markets, José Ossandón engages with the ways in which social theories instruct the researchers that take them up. He argues that there are mainly three different characters, or personae, of how to write after Callon's performativity theory, each taking different stances in relation to empirical inquiry: the 'performative-detective', the 'philosophical-ethnographer' and the 'market-reformist'. According to him, these characters do not resemble individual authors, rather they indicate the most central intellectual stances advanced by ANT scholars in the field of market studies and beyond. Subsequently, and with references to the intellectual positions of Callon and Bruno Latour, Fabián Muniesa takes up the question whether or not ANT can be a critique of capital. If we shift the research focus from capitalism to the various practices of capitalisation, as Muniesa argues, ANT certainly has much to contribute and further research is required to develop its critical potential. The last chapter, by Michael Guggenheim, might support this goal, as it further illuminates the relationship between ANT, critical theory and critique. Taking critique to be a situational achievement, Guggenheim makes a case for inventive and speculative methods within ANT. As tools for generative interventions, these methods can be regarded tools of critique because they enable us to engage in experimental modifications of the practices we study.

Acknowledging giant partners of ANT

Section 2 discusses, through seven contributions, some of the philosophies and academic currents most relevant to the shaping of ANT's past and present, and elaborates on their potential to shape future ANT research. Casper Bruun Jensen explores Gilles Deleuze's rhizomes, Alvis Mattozzi Charles Peirce's semiotic theory, Jérôme D. Pontille Jack Goody's seminal work in the anthropology of writing, Noortje Marres American Pragmatism, Ericka Johnson the oeuvre of Donna Haraway, Michael Schillmeier Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy and, last but not least, Martin Savransky enquires into divergences between ANT and the philosophy of Isabelle Stengers. All chapters demonstrate that the encounter between these academic currents and ANT is far from completed. Nortje Marres, for instance, demonstrates how the engagement with pragmatist philosophy can still inspire the recomposition of ANT, especially in relation to themes and

categories that have already been widely perceived as obsolete or outdated within ANT debate, including interpretation, society and epistemology. As these themes continue to re-surface empirically and as problems for research, Marres asserts, it is they who seriously challenge ANT today and, at the same time, offer the potential to reform it experimentally.

Extending the scope of ANT

Section 3 builds on the opening section, delving into the agencies of ANT research by reconsidering (some of) the limits arising from (some parts of) the approach, while making suggestions about how to break new ground to overcome them. The section begins with one of the prevailing concerns within ANT, which is the mutual enactments of non-humans and humans. In his chapter, Nigel Clark cautions that ANT's symmetry principle could lead to neglecting the analytical value of processes largely dominated by non-humans, such as the global climate regime. The more-than-human also features in the two subsequent contributions: first, Kane Race elaborates on the value of weaving bodily becomings and affectivities into ANT analyses, and next, Derek P. McCormack demonstrates the ways in which ANT accounts can benefit from the affective turn. Drawing on feminist science and technology studies and returning to the debate on care started by López-Gómez in the first section, in her chapter, Sonja Jerak-Zuiderent illustrates how moments of disconcertment during fieldwork can be purposefully deployed for ethical and political re-imaginings of the worlds we study. Next, Francis Halsall's chapter revisits ANT as a form of contemporary art practice, arguing critically that ANT's analytical focus on fragmenting subjects and objects is best understood as effects of late capitalism. In a seemingly contradictory movement, Marcelo C. Rosa develops the argument that, in revisiting the limitations of Western ontologies in academic sociology, ANT can serve as a partner of Southern social theories. The section concludes with a chapter by Wen-Yuan Lin on how ANT might improve its analytical repertoire and naturalized understanding of 'the empirical' through taking challenges of equivocation from outside the dominant Western tradition seriously. For this, Lin introduces the example of divergent modes of doing difference in Chinese medicine and explores how ANT's ontology of difference could gain from these articulations.

Tackling less explored regions

Section 4 discusses, as already posed in the title of Section 3, ‘trading zones’, the tackling of issues and regions less explored by ANT scholars while simultaneously providing productive incentives for conceptual refinement. The authors attend, fairly explicitly, to reciprocities of absences and presences in the enactments of concepts, artefacts, practices and realities. For example, the first chapter by Amade M’charek and Irene van Oorschot begins with an exploration of the societal doings of race and the production of difference enabled through practices of population genetics and forensic science. ANT sensitivities are applied to disentangle the relations that *do* race as much as the relations that *are done* by racial categorisations. The authors show that an occupation with race challenges ‘presentist’ tendencies within ANT and alerts us to engaging with the temporalities of absent presences, such as the seemingly forgotten or continuously erased. Uli Beisel similarly calls for taking absences into account when she discusses the assemblages of science, economy and ecology in global health. Taking the development of an anti-malaria vaccine as an example, she emphasizes that, in our world with alarming climate and health disasters, it is increasingly necessary for ANT scholars committed to the study of health to learn from the effects of vulnerabilities and uncertainties around the globe, and to explore those processes that remain unconsidered, discouraged or unfunded. The remaining chapters in the section discuss the impact of ANT on the study of economic expertise (Liliana Doganova), urban life (Alexa Färber), subjectivity (Arthur Arruda Leal Ferreira), and maintenance and repair (David J. Denis), and invite ANT scholars to expand the analytical scope to that which is considered invaluable, promised, marginalized or disregarded.

Scales, sites and place-making within ANT inquiry

Section 5 begins with three contributions debating what a site or place of inquiry is or can be for and in ANT research. The first chapter, by Endre Dányi, attends to the question of whether or not parliaments are still privileged sites for studying liberal democracy. Dányi contends that, in an ANT tradition, parliaments are best studied as ‘meta-sites’ that bring together, shape and transform modes of doing democratic politics across broader places and

practices. Next, Albená Yaneva and Brett Mommersteeg assert that ‘sites’ (in architectural processes and beyond) can also be analysed as practices, as processes of ‘site-ing’, a linguistic twist that allows studying them ethnographically as (temporal) achievements and simultaneously accounts for the performativity of the emerging ethnographic composition. Finally, Robert Oppenheim takes up ANT to address conflicting assemblages of a city and, more specifically, certain places in a city. Oppenheim suggests scrutinizing how these are related through ‘circulating normativities’, themselves approached as artefacts involved in place-making. By highlighting potentiality and desirability as essential elements of normativities, his chapter, in accordance with Färber’s in Section 4, points out the need to extend the methodological ANT principle of ‘follow the actor’ to the sites and registers of the anticipated. The next chapter, by Kregg Hetherington, introduces the site of the courtroom and reconsiders ANT’s productivity in engaging with and facilitating a politics of environmental harm. Drawing on Jacques Rancière’s philosophy of the political, Hetherington encourages ‘subtle’ research that attends to and amplifies existing and developing political disruptions. The final two chapters discuss the limits and potentialities of ANT inquiry into and beyond the sites and scales where politics of nature (Kristin Asdal) and automated digital platform engagement (Carolyn Gerlitz and Esther Weltevrede) are done. Gerlitz and Weltevrede thus intriguingly demonstrate the methodological limits of the ‘follow the actor’ approach when it comes to the analysis of automated digital relations.

Extending classical modes of doing ANT research

The final section of the Companion is devoted to the potentialities of ANT in ‘public-professional engagement’, the term the editors use in the title of the section. Even though previous contributions also pay attention to collaborative knowledge making between ANT scholars and engaged publics, this section deals particularly with questions of how ANT analysts can extend their modes of doing research beyond description towards activism (Tomás Sánchez Criado and Israel Rodríguez-Giralt), experimental forms of collaboration (Shuhei Kimura and Kohei Inose) and participation (Emma Cardwell and Claire Waterton), speculative constructivism (Alex Wilkie) or non-academic work practices (Yuri Carvajal Bañados). The authors of the

chapters make clear that what is at stake here is the active shaping and enabling of (more-than-human) relation-making processes that constitute the core of democratic communities. In this regard, Criado and Rodríguez-Giralt draw on research activism performed as part of the Spanish ‘15-M’ (May 15th) movement and display ethnographic practices of ‘joint problem-making’ as a way of involving ANT research in the ongoing production of common worlds. In the following contribution, based on imaginative research activities after the earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima nuclear accident, Kimura and Inose recount how public anthropologists can employ ANT to engage with shaken realities in the midst of a disaster. In their case, inventive strategies of getting involved in the activities of fact-making about the aftermath of the disaster alongside and together with affected locals, activists and other professionals made ANT research part of the efforts that rendered life possible under devastating circumstances.

Getting involved with ANT in science and society ‘in-the-making’ is also central to the final three chapters, which explore how ANT research can be activated (a) to engage silenced and vulnerable actors, whether human or non-human, into processes of world-making (Cardwell and Waterton); (b) to develop ‘procompositional practices’ generative of novel and speculative ways of thinking, doing and assembling (Wilkie); and, finally, (c) to run public institutions and implement heterogenous connections in our spheres of influence that reach beyond academia (Carvajal Bañados).

Wayfaring through the open terrain of ANT

In summary, most of the Companion’s contributions can be said to centrally engage with the agencies assembled by ANT sensibilities and concepts. At the same time, the collection demonstrates a variety of non-canonical options for recomposing ANT in order to make it a rewarding future travel companion on less frequented or even abandoned analytical paths. Bruno Latour is, unquestionably, quoted most in references to classical ANT. The selection of key intellectual partners of ANT, as discussed in Section 2, remains necessarily partial, as the editors themselves acknowledge. Other critical influences, rarely mentioned in the book as a whole, could of course also have been considered, including the impact of Harold Garfinkel’s

ethnomethodological approach, the oeuvres of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler or the significance of postcolonial theories pioneered by Homi K. Bhabha or Gayatri C. Spivak, to name but a few. Speaking of absences, I notice that the Companion keeps a discussion of the regimes of academic knowledge production largely implicit, even though the further development of the ANT paradigm cannot really be viewed in isolation from them.¹

Finally, let me address the editors' consideration of whether or not the book is suitable as a map through the universe of ANT, and for whom. In terms of Tim Ingold's (2000: 219-242) argument about the differences between wayfinding and navigation, the Companion can certainly be considered a sincere effort to map some of the most intriguing contemporary intellectual places of ANT. Still, as the editors declare in their introduction, the book is not a representational map for navigating the terrain of ANT. Rather, it invites the readers to join the Companion's movements of wayfinding, and to take, at will, inspiration for their own multiple formations of knowledge, whether within, 'near', or with cross-reference to ANT. Readers seeking an introduction to ANT will find here not an applicable canon, but extensive references to both classical ANT work and recent analytical movements with considerable linkages to ANT. As the Companion covers a wide range of topics such as urban life, dis/ability, ecological crisis, democracy, race or digital practices, it can also be recommended as an entry point for those seeking ANT-informed approaches to specific research questions and fields. Of course, in this sense, it also suits already established ANT proponents. As sorting is contingent, with the result that many contributions speak to more than one of the sections' topics, and the chapter titles are formulated in questions, a quick overview of the book's coverage is difficult, so the index provides a particularly valuable entry point.

In conclusion, I commend the editors' and authors' extraordinary success in bringing together and articulating a wide range of vibrant debates on the existing and future potentials of engaging with ANT. In the end, and from an ANT-informed intellectual stance, it is indeed less important whether the

¹ For an exception see the concluding remarks on academic writing infrastructures in Jérôme D. Pontille's chapter and Färber (2014).

approach itself will live on: far more important is the extent to which ANT continues to provide inspiration and support for the challenging practices of world-making in which we all are inevitably implied.

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