Reading Bruno Latour's Reassembling the Social:
An Introduction to Actor-Newtork-Theory

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Abstract

Latour does not seek any "hidden" reasons behind actions; there is not a dictionary or encyclopedia explaining the sources of the behaviors of the actors. No meta-language is in question. The analyst cannot address any invisible agency. If an agency is invisible, then it has no effect, therefore it is not an agency. If an analyst says: "No one mentions it. For Latour, agency is not limited to human beings, but objects should also be counted as agents which is one of the most attractive aspect of actor-network theory.

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For Latour, agency is not limited to human beings, but objects should also be counted as agents which is one of the most attractive aspect of actor-network theory. Eradication of the hierarchy between objects and human beings is highly popular now, but without doubt Latour has a special place in the development process of this theoretical venture.

Eradication of the hierarchy between objects and human beings is highly popular now, but without doubt Latour has a special place in the development process of this theoretical venture. In simple terms, Latour argues that "things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on." (72)

Regarding objects ontologically as equal as human beings does not mean that all of them have the same power of influence, or in Latour's terms, mediation. But still objects have the capacity to be mediators. "Even objects, which a minute before appeared fully automatic, autonomous, and devoid of human agents, are now made of crowds of frantically moving humans with heavy equipment."

If objects are also at stake for a sociological inquiry, and if Latour does not admit hidden causal relationships, then it is possible to argue that everything is connected, against which Graham Harman, for example, claims that everything cannot be connected. The following long statement is quite useful so as to understand that Latour excesses the limits of any cause-effect relationship, not in a transcendent sense, but in an imannentist way. He says: "If social element A is said to 'cause' the existence of B, C, and D, then not only should it be able to generate back B, C, and D, but it should also account for the differences between B, C, and D, except if it can be shown that B, C, and D are the same thing, in which case their differences can be declared unimportant.

One might argue that Latour draws attention to similar points positivism does. But the answer is no. Latour does not understand objects as entities existing out there to be discovered and grasped, but rather he argues that, following Heidegger, objects function as gatherings. To put it differently, Latour focuses on matters of concern, which reflects a different image from matters of fact. He elucidates: "Matters of fact remain silent, they may allow themselves to be simply kicked and

thumped at, but we are not going to run out of data about matters of concern as their traces are now found everywhere." (115) A thing is never "the one", but always in the condition of differentiating itself, therefore Latour ontologically accentuates on becoming rather than being.

Within the framework of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) Latour (2005) delineates what he calls the "sociology of associations", setting it in contrast to the "sociology of the social" paradigm that has dominated the social sciences for over a century. Latour delineates two steps that must be undertaken successively in ANT, in each case by following the actors and their choices: the first is taking into account the number of possible participants in the social world and the second is putting into order the multiplicity discovered in the first.

The logic of Actor Network Theory (ANT) which first articulates, and then problematizes the distinction between humans and nonhumans, relies on this effacement of (former) categorical distinctions. That is probably why ANT, while so minutely deconstructing the dichotomy between society and nature, or epistemology and ontology, nonetheless retains rather crudely the human/nonhuman distinction throughout its theorization.

True, the issue of anthropocentrism, which lies at the heart of this human/nonhuman division, is discussed by Latour in this book, as well as, for instance, in his paper "To Modernize or to Ecologize? That is the question"

However, if the elephants, the meandering waters, and all other entities on his list have been subsumed under the general category of "nonhumans," saying that "humans" are defined in relation to them, is merely tautological. In other words, Latour's anti-anthropocentrism consists in simply paraphrasing "humans" as "non-nonhumans," which as anyone can see, does not help to put the human/nonhuman dichotomy in perspective (the fundamental question to ask is therefore not "have we ever been modern?" but "have we ever been human?").

This role of 'biophysical actants' is reenacted in Latour's "Will Non-humans be Saved? An argument in ecotheology." In order to prove his point that "Reference" (the way we know entities)

3

and "Reproduction" (the ways entities persist) can and should be distinguished, Latour takes recourse to Darwin. After admitting that "the confusion between Reproduction and Reference was less noticeable when we were dealing with so-called 'inert' entities," since "the ways we access them and the ways they are supposed to reproduce themselves are so similar that the collage or hybrid notion of matter was hardly noticeable" (Latour, 467), Darwin and all his biophysical actants (via Uexküll) step in to provide the necessary distinction. Simply put, Umwelt, or "the alternative medium in which biological organisms were allowed to reproduce" (Latour, 468) cannot be reduced to res extensa. "Individual organisms in its own Umwelt" (Latour, 472) is thus inserted into the naive equation between "the world of mere objects" and "nature" (Latour, 471, 472) to open up the world of "nonhumans." The fact that this regime is addressed as "Reproduction," simply reminds us once again of the 'labor' these actants are supposed to engage inside their respective Umwelten.

The final section, where Latour addresses the political implications of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), was the best and dismantled most of the objections of those who like to rely on omnipresent, hegemonic forces. Latour's a good writer too, he doesn't overcomplicate things and has a nice habit of offering parallel concrete examples in sets of four or more.

Latour follows the same path he has always followed, as he described it in Science in Action; he follows the actors. He listens to what people say and the reasons they give for doing it. And then he traces those reasons back to other reasons, and figures out what forces are acting on the people. And it turns out it's never "society" at the end of the various chains. It's other people, other actors.

Instead, Latour proposes the actor-network as a central concept. The actor is acted upon by a variety of mediators, each of which is pushing him in a direction.

Latour uses this dialogue to poke fun at his caricature of the traditional sociologist, who parachutes into an organization, comes up with an overarching theory, imparts it to the participants to edify and enlighten them, and leaves. These overarching theories always start to fall apart when you try to apply them to something, much like the classification systems in Sorting Things Out. Latour calls such theories panoramas, in that they provide the illusion of displaying the whole landscape,

4

but are merely shadows on a wall; "They design a picture which has no gap in it, giving the spectator the powerful impression of being fully immersed in the real world… it's this excess of coherence that gives the illusion away." (p. 188)

Latour makes the same claim as to how universal social concepts can be created through his methods.

"Can we obtain some sort of universal agreement? Of course we can! Provided you find a way to hook up your local instrument to one of the many metrological chains whose material network can be fully described… No discontinuity allowed, which is just what ANT [actor-network theory] needs for tracing social topography. Ours is the social theory that has taken metrology as the paramount example of what it is to expand locally everywhere." (p. 10)

Latour wrote this book as a critique of the way that social scientists use the word social. He argues that sociologists conceive of the social as something that already exists. He suggests that we have taken this category for granted, assuming it's an established entity or something that is predetermined.

Latour disagrees with this. He believes the social is something that must be formed or forged. He suggests that the social is something we can study and urges social scientists to ask questions about how exactly, the social comes to be. So how does that happen? According to Latour, the social happens via networks. Let's talk about that now.

Actor-Network-Theory

The major part of 'Reassembling the Social' is Latour's concept of Actor Network Theory (ANT). This is a theory that Latour developed along with some of his colleagues. At its core, ANT is really about how people and objects come together to create the social, which consists of things like culture and knowledge.

Latour was very concerned with understanding how people and technologies or other objects interact. He wanted to know how networks of humans and technologies form. In Latour's formulation, everything can be an actor. So, people, machines, animals, books -- you get the idea. So, the network part of this equation is the assemblage of people and things. Latour calls this associations. Associations of people and objects form networks.

Latour uses the example of a scientific laboratory to help us understand what he means. So, the scientists inside the lab interact with equipment, like microscopes, with each other, and with outside competition like other labs, to create knowledge. All of these objects come together to form associations.

Technologies, like the computer or device you're using to read this lecture, are not neutral. They take on meaning after a series of associations, or encounters, with one another, like equipment in the lab.

In the course of the book we will learn to distinguish the standard sociology of the social from a more radical subfamily which I will call critical sociology. Critical sociology is defined by three traits: 1) it doesn't only limit itself to the social but replaces the object to be studied by another matter made of social relations; 2) it claims that this substitution is unbearable for the social actors who need to live under the illusion that there is something 'other' than social there; and it considers that the actors' objections to their social explanations offer the best proof that those explanations are right." (9)

Latour refers to "traditional" sociology "sociology of the social" and the broader view "sociology of associations" ("associology") (9)

ANT is particularly (and possibly only) useful "in situations where innovations proliferate, where group boundaries are uncertain, when the range of entities to be taken into account fluctuates…" (11).

"…I'm not interested in refutation […] but in proposition. How far can one go by suspending the common sense hypothesis that the existence of a social realm offers a legitimate frame of reference for the social sciences?" (12)

Latour acknowledges the density and difficulty of ANT: "Traveling with ANT, I am afraid to say, will turn out to be agonizingly slow. Movements will be constantly interrupted, interfered with, disrupted, and dislocated by the five types of uncertainties. In the world ANT is trying to travel through, no displacement seems possible without costly and painful translations. Sociologists of the social seem to glide like angels, transporting power and connections almost immaterially, while the ANT-scholar has to trudge like an ant, carrying the heavy gear in order to generate even the tiniest connection" (25).

Latour's immanentisation of the social realm has political implications insofar as it also functions as a rejection of any potential notion of a politics of transcendence, essence, or truth: 'There is no dualistic opposition between natural right and cultural might, but a single immanent plane where mightless right may as well not even exist. All consoling appeals to a transcendent authority are pointless as long as we fail to amass the needed allies to allow our position to prevail' (35). So, as well as a thorough rejection of a politics of truth, Latour's ontology appears to offer a more Machiavellian/Hobbesian politics of power struggles and the pursuit of associations – including associations with nonhuman actors – as the only route to political effectiveness (33-34).

It is here that Harman strikes a cautionary note which becomes a central theme throughout RTP: does Latour's flat ontology of human and nonhuman actors not run the risk of ontologising politics?

. This idea stuck me as being postmodern in its formulation, due to the disintegration of human/non-human dichotomies. However, from Latour's explanation on page 10 it is not clear exactly how Actor-Network-Theory diverges from sociology of associations. I view Actor-Network-Theory as a way to incorporate new roles that allow new figures to express their own agency. What solidifies and clarifies this concept for me is the idea of genes expressing agency. I

7

cannot say that I have ever thought of genes displaying agency over my own body or biological components even demonstrating agency, so Latour's commentary added an unusual perspective. I struggle to not find this concept as anthropomorphic in nature, which I hope Latour is able to clarify in later.