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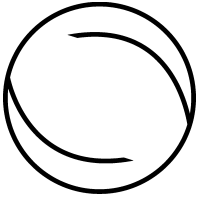
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## Book Reviews: New Books in Organization Theory

### **Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory**

2005, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 301 pages, hbk

DOI: 10.1177/0170840606071164

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There is no more a method for learning  
than there is a method for finding treasures...

(Giles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 1968/1997: 165)

Although there is no method for finding treasures, treasure hunters are forever looking for maps or guides — and this is what Bruno Latour's book is. What constitutes a treasure is highly personal, which is a reason why there can be no method for it. But a map or a guide confirms that the treasure exists, and motivates the searcher to begin the journey.

The treasure Latour has in mind is the possibility — or rather many possibilities — of realizing the traditional goal of social sciences: to understand, describe, and explain the social by nontraditional means. In order to do this, students of the social need to abandon the recent idea that 'social' is a kind of essential property that can be discovered and measured, and return to the etymology of the word, which meant something connected or assembled. The question for social sciences is not, therefore, 'How social is this?', but how things, people, and ideas become connected and assembled in larger units. Actor-network theory (ANT) is a guide to the process of answering this question. It is not a theory of the social, but a theory of how to study the social, set apart by this specific definition of its object.

Having explained his intentions in the Introduction, Latour demonstrates in Part I how to deploy controversies about the social world. What is taken for granted is not easy to study; controversies mean that the ground of the obvious has been moved, at least in part. Each controversy is a source of uncertainty to be explored, and there are five such sources, discussed in five chapters.

The first source of uncertainty is the status of groups: do they exist, or are they being constantly formed and re-formed? ANT takes the latter option, and is able, therefore, to show that 'the first feature of the social world is this constant tracing of boundaries by people over some other people' (p. 28). The scholars who chose the first option are themselves engaging in such tracing:

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each 'organization study' adds stability to a unit called 'organization', which might otherwise be on the verge of dissolving or regrouping. No wonder that in times of constant mergers and acquisitions, young researchers may feel lost when 'the organization' they set out to study no longer exists when they reach it. No such surprises to the ANTs: they simply follow an actor and note in their field notebook the name used for the location they arrive at. It is not groups that need to be studied, but the work of group-making and unmaking.

The second source of uncertainty concerns agency: who or what is acting when an action can be observed? The notion of actor-network strongly suggests that that which presents itself to an observer as an 'actor' may, in fact, be a whole network. One of the traces leading in this direction is the inconsistency of accounts given by those who seem to be actors to the researchers. Instead, in order to explore this source of uncertainty, researchers try to eliminate it by picking from actors' accounts only that which can be easily incorporated into a theory. Thus ironing out the inconsistency from the accounts, the researchers erase indications of multiplicity of agencies, which ought to interest them most.

If there is any uncertainty as to how agency should be described, it follows that even objects can be seen as possessing agency — the third source of uncertainty to deploy. It is at this point that the definition of 'social' is significantly extended: from 'humans only' to 'all actants that can be associated'. This extension is nothing new to fiction or to everyday life — yesterday's faithful companions such as dogs and horses have been replaced by computers and iPods — and the need for associations to extend beyond humans has always been obvious. Afraid perhaps of losing their domain, social scientists are fastidious in differentiating between humans, who are their concern; and non-humans, who belong to other disciplines. In organization studies, this self-definition is often revealed in cooperative projects run by sociologists and economists. Sociologists tend to lose interest when 'money' comes into the picture, expecting economists, living in the space between social and natural sciences, to pick it up for inspection. And yet what would money do without bonding itself to human beings?

The purpose here is not, however, to anthropomorphize insentient beings, although such an operation is performed daily by all competent speakers. It is to point out the special role that objects play in associations: they stabilize. This is why contracts are written, obituaries carved in stone, and technical norms built into the instruments to make the users behave in a prescribed way. We do not live in a society, but in a collective — composed of humans and non-humans. It is also here that Latour begins to answer the puzzling critique often directed toward ANT: that it ignores 'power relations'. Far from ignoring power or using it as an explanation, ANT attempts to explain it. 'People are rich because they possess capital' is a tautology. 'How did they create the bond?' is an ANT question.

The fourth source of uncertainty is the status of facts: how to tell the difference between a 'matter of fact' and a 'matter of concern'? The difference is in the making, and it is this making that ANT wants to study. Concern can turn suppositions into facts and politics can turn facts into concerns — or delegate them into oblivion. The discussion of this source of uncertainty gives Latour the

opportunity to explain why ANT abandoned the label of ‘social constructivism’. ANT’s interpretation read ‘social’ as ‘not individual’ (as, for example, in Piagetian constructivism), and ‘construction’ as ‘not creation’. The common reading is, however, ‘human contrivance’ (as opposed to divine or natural creation) — in other words, negative, or at least weak. The label can be abandoned, but not the task. Studying how matters become concerns or facts is an obvious task for sociology of science, but equally obvious for management studies. Isn’t this exactly what both accounting and strategic management set out to accomplish?

The fifth source of uncertainty will be easily recognized: how to write research accounts? This chapter is both an encouragement to literary inventiveness and a warning against glibness and overconfidence. The desirable opposite of rigour is not sloppiness, but vivacity and flexibility. ‘Textual accounts are the social scientist’s laboratory’ (p. 127), and, consequently, ‘A good text is never an unmediated portrait of what it describes’ (p. 136). One point worth emphasizing is Latour’s claim that ‘the mere description’ is always the most difficult task in a research report, from which many writers flee, to hide behind comforting if empty abstractions.

The first part ends with a dialogue with a student, confused by the (extolled!) difficulty of doing ANT studies of organizations (a collection of texts by those who tried anyway has been assembled by Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005). The dialogue is certainly a composite, but convincing exactly because of that: it represents many a doubt voiced by beginning researchers. Here again Latour (1999) mocks the name of his approach while defending it.

The fictitious Professor of the dialogue may be poking fun at the Student (who is also irreverent, creating a symmetrical discourse), but Professor Latour takes to heart the difficulties reported by the student. So Part II begins with an admission that it is not easy to trace the social, and gives advice on how to study associations in three moves. To be able to perform these moves, a new cartography is needed. The moves of the new scientists of a social are not to be between local and global or between micro and macro, because such places do not exist; they will be moving across a flatland.

The first move consists of localizing the global — of realizing that there is no ‘global’, but only a chain of connected localities. ‘No place can be said to be bigger than any other place, but some can be said to benefit from far safer connections with many *more* places than others’ (p. 176).

But the local never occurs in one place only, so the second move must be a redistribution of the local. The loving conversation that you overheard at a nearby café has been fed by dozens of Hollywood films and hundreds of pop songs that have been produced — and consumed — in distant localities and distant times. The lovers who look into each other’s eyes see in them reflections of Lillian Gish, Greta Garbo, and Julia Roberts; Errol Flynn, Rudolf Valentino, and Jeremy Irons. And if intimate interactions are so densely populated, how overcrowded must be the public ones, such as take place in organizations!

The example I have used made obvious the role of film technology in a redistribution of the local. Less obvious is the role of the interior decoration of the café, which, unlike a huge table in a beerhouse, allows the lovers to engage in an intimate conversation. Less obvious as well is the fact that a love scene between

Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall was also once a local interaction. It is those less obvious aspects of localizing and globalizing that Latour wants the organization students to make known in the first two moves. Neither 'global contexts' nor 'face-to-face interactions' can be taken for granted; they are not what they seem to be.

When both moves are performed simultaneously, the third move becomes obvious, as that which necessarily comes into focus is the character of connections. If what seems to be global consists of many connected times and places, and what seems to be local is a product of many connected times and places, how are these sites connected? And what makes such connections stable? After all, the world of organizations is anything but flat — but how are the hierarchies made? Of what are they made? The metaphor of the flatland is the way to differentiate the standpoint of the observer from that of an actor. An ANT observer is a sceptic who needs to be shown how the mountains and valleys have been constructed. Here, the role of standardization, formalization, and classification of any kind becomes immediately obvious.

In the concluding chapter, Latour arrives at the point announced throughout the book by a variety of allusions: the need for a political stance, which also differs from that of critical social sciences as we know them. His main critique of critical theories is their neglect of the phenomena that ANT wants to explore and explain. They see power, domination, and exploitation as explanatory concepts rather than phenomena in need of explanation. In his suggestion for a new kind of political epistemology, Latour wants to go beyond the eternal dilemma of choosing between 'the dream of disinterestedness and the opposite dream of engagement and relevance' (p. 250). This new move would be, for any member of social sciences, to practise *collecting*, as a way toward the progressive composition of one common world. He suggests a replacement of the traditional political question 'How many are we?' with the question 'Can we live together?' Commonsensical as it may sound, it is a truly revolutionary question, not least in organization theory, where the distinctions between leaders and followers, men and women, employers and employees, producers and consumers — followed by counting the forces — was a matter of routine for any political faction. The idea of building a collective will allow objects to join in, still preserving the heterogeneity. After all, 'to study is always to do politics in the sense that it collects or composes what the common world is made of' (p. 256).

This is a book for three groups of readers. Scholars familiar with ANT will find in it plenty of new anecdotes and interesting pieces of reasoning to refresh their interest. Scholars unfamiliar with ANT will find in it a systematic presentation of this way of framing the social and specific lists of steps to undertake, were they to espouse it. And, last but not least, scholars hostile to ANT will get a better idea of what they are hostile toward, as this is sometimes unclear.

The formal trait of setting some parts of the text of a more digressive character in text boxes will facilitate the lecture for beginners, who may omit them at a first reading, and connoisseurs will be delighted to immerse themselves in these boxes. The text is also exemplary in its use of references and footnotes. No references in parentheses litter the text. Footnotes are informative, and referencing in the text is always justified: the reader knows exactly why a given

source or an author has been mentioned. Perhaps this is a long-awaited sign that Oxford University Press is ready to return to the Oxford Referencing System? No doubt, however, that Latour's book can also serve, not so much as a model to copy, but certainly as a source of inspiration for how to write a social science text: vividly, engagingly, eloquently.

The book is addressed to all social scientists, but organization theorists probably have a special duty to read it, as we live at present in a world that is organized through and through. Although organizing may be only one way of reassembling, it may be the most common way nowadays. And, if I may paraphrase Latour, 'organizations have never explained anything; organizations have to be explained'. There is much to be done, and this book may be of manifold use.

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