



Reviews Section

Extended Review

Reassembling the Social—An Introduction to Actor Network Theory

BRUNO LATOUR. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 312 pp. £19.99 (pbk)
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Friday, 10.30 in the morning, in the meeting room of the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Trento (Italy), nine people are sitting around a table, and all of them seem half asleep. Some of those present have degrees in sociology, others in psychology, yet others in political science or in communication science. Eight of them are now taking a PhD course in information systems and organization, while I have completed one in sociology and social research.

We are here to discuss Latour's most recent book. One reason for the discussion is that in a few days time the PhD students will be travelling to Paris on a study visit and will meet Mr Bruno Latour in person. I have other commitments and will not be going to Paris, but I want to be present at the discussion because I have to review the book and have yet to decide what to write. To be explicit:

- Bruno Latour is one of my preferred authors, and for me the 'monster' called Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is one of the most original, as well as genuine, creations of sociology;¹
- I thought I would devour the book at a sitting; instead I read it with difficulty, and I must admit that it only began to interest me after a hundred pages or so;
- Without going into questions of 'authoriality', I ask myself, how am I going to write a review of a book by one of my favourite authors but which has failed to enthuse me?

In the meantime, Maurizio has started talking about the book:

The book has two aims: first, to draw connections around what it calls 'sociology of associations', as opposed to the dominant 'sociology of the social'; second, to furnish tools and terms with which to construct a good account based on sociology of associations. To do so, it surveys a number of controversies—termed 'sources of uncertainty'—neglected by the sociology of the social. The second part of the book provides metaphorical and lexical tools with which to construct a good ANT description.

In his conclusions, Latour re-examines the political commitment of a researcher involved with issues concerning political epistemology (a concept close to Anne Marie Mol's 'ontological politics'), or better, 'cosmopolitics' (the reference is to Isabelle Stengers).

The difference between sociology of associations and sociology of the social is presented as a return to the discipline's original task. In order to assert themselves as scientists, sociologists have drawn too rapid conclusions, and they have constructed groups, actions, and matters of fact too hastily. The task of the sociology of associations is to avoid these shortcuts by following the connections—the associations—among the elements which make up the social. The latter must be 'reassembled'. The inversion between the two sociologies is clear, explanans and explanandum are reversed: the social is not the glue that holds together what otherwise would be unconnected; rather, the social is what is held together by other kinds of connectors; it is what must be explained.

The sociology of the social therefore views the social at a meta-level as what lies behind human occurrences, orienting them and explaining them. The social is Marx's 'Structure' or Parsons' 'Culture': it determines what happens at the level of individual and/or group action. The task of the sociologist is therefore to reveal what occurs in the social through the privileged point of view afforded him/her by the researcher's role. Conversely, the sociology of associations addresses the world by considering it akin to a surface on which heterogeneous actors (including sociologists) construct and reconstruct material and semiotic forms of sociality. The researcher's task thus becomes that of observing the ways in which the world is assembled and constructed on the basis of some kind of order and/or sociality. In the name of a latter-day empiricism, the researcher must follow the trajectories of associations and connections, describing but not ordering them, recording but not filtering them. There is no social beyond performance, and what appears to be enduring and stable is the exception that must be explained.

Latour takes a clear stance on the history of sociological thought: he urges a return to the origins of the discipline. He opposes, and prefers, Gabriel Tarde to Emile Durkheim. The position of ANT, which Latour adopts explicitly and has never previously advocated, is therefore clear: Tarde is usually neglected in the handbooks on the history of sociological thought, being associated with Durkheim in the debate on suicide, from which he emerges the loser. The reference to Tarde, and the appreciation reserved almost uniquely for Harold Garfinkel among the classics of sociological thought, puts ANT in a position 'traditionally' different from the various forms of functionalism, neo-functionalism, critical sociology, and (in part) social constructionism.

While Maurizio is talking, I observe the positioning of the people around the table, noting that the men (3) and women (5) are sitting opposite each other (I'm at the head of the table—perhaps acting as a bridge between them). I think to myself: 'There you are! The classic grouping by someone who reasons in terms of pre-established categories, when the people here could be grouped according to features other than sex/gender.' I look for other possible associations and consider the objects on the table: laptop computers, a digital camera, various departmental brochures, numerous mobile phones, photocopies, a bag, a bottle of water, some pens. I think that I could 'follow the non-humans' and group the people present according to the objects they use and which enable them to 'stay connected' and cultivate various forms of sociality: those wearing glasses and those who are not, those using pen and paper and those writing on computers. In terms of 'techno-social prostheses', thus, the first thing that I notice is a curious technological divide: on one side of the table there are three laptops, on the other five mobile phones (I have one too, but it is switched off and in my pocket). I notice something further. As Maurizio talks (frequently glancing at his computer screen displaying his notes on the book), some of those present are taking notes, others are leafing through Latour's book, one is rubbing cream into her hands, some are looking out of the window and/or (like me) writing and thinking about things that are loosely connected

with what Maurizio is saying. They are doing different things, they 'constantly differ', to put it à la Derrida; and it is this that makes any attempt to describe their actions univocally in terms of pre-established categories premature (if not arrogant).

Maurizio continues:

One of the most interesting proposals of the book concerns the use of 'infra-language' in research. An infra-language is a language whose only purpose is to create links between one frame of reference and another. Consequently, an infra-language can be interpreted as an attempt to furnish lexical and analytical tools that remind the researcher of his/her role as a participant in the construction of reality, and that ensure that his/her disciplinary jargon is understood.

On discussing what he calls the 'prime source of uncertainty' (the formation of groups), Latour provides an example of the rhetorical strategies with which the entire first part of his book is constructed: an introduction that criticizes the approach taken by the sociology of the social to the topic; a list of strategies and commitments to follow in remaining faithful to the infra-language; reassertion of the performative nature of the social. Thus thrown into question is the practice of selecting a priori 'the ingredients already present in the social' (p. 28), because social aggregates should be described with performative, not ostensive, definitions. Herein lies, I believe, the strength of infra-language: when research begins, the existence of groups in the phenomenon is not postulated; it is analysis of the phenomenon that enables reconstruction of the groups tied to it. Moreover, infra-language lets the researcher be relativist while at the same time comparing phenomena. The differences among different frames of reference can be described as differences of scale relative to the connections mobilized.

I think Maurizio is right. His final sentence brings to my mind a passage in the book where Latour claims: 'Relativism is not the relativity of truth, but the truth of relations.' I reflect that perhaps what struck me most in the book when I read it is the idea that what we call 'reality' is such because of (not despite) the fact that it is constructed—an argument already put forward in other writings by Latour (in particular, in *Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches*, 1996). But here it is forcefully and repeatedly enunciated. Whence derives the metaphor of assembly and construction: those who construct buildings (and therefore also those who have dealings with them as 'structures') have no doubt that the edifice is real precisely because someone has built them. Matters for discussion may be the characteristics of the construction: its solidity, durability, extension, innovativeness and, why not, aesthetic. It is on these elements that researchers' accounts should concentrate, which induces Latour to claim that there is no reason why description and interpretation should be separated. A description is 'good' when it establishes connections and evinces the heterogeneity of action and its participants: for in a sociology of associations it is action that defines the actors. Indeed, a rule of 'descriptive ecology' more or less explicitly stated by Latour refers to the 'doing' of actors: if actors act, then description of them (and of their action) should indubitably be considered and made accountable; but if actors are driven by 'role', 'culture', 'cognitive schemata', 'market', rather than by 'globalization', then those same actors are no more than puppets in the hands of social scientists. Hence what is made 'accountable' is more than anything else the action of the latter. In other words, if a description is able to make the heterogeneity and complexity of action 'accountable', there is no need for interpretation, because the description is in itself explanatory (or performative) of the connections that form the (social?) world. Otherwise, reproduced for the

umpteenth time is a world (and a science) artificially distinguished between actions and meanings, actors and structures, descriptions and interpretations.

These thoughts have distracted me from Maurizio's presentation (he is discussing the second part of the book, the most propositive one, where Latour shows how to re-assemble the social in three moves: 'localizing the global', 'redistributing the local', and 'connecting sites'), which was now concluding:

However, there is one aspect of the book that I find unconvincing: its almost total lack of comparison between the accounts furnished by the sociology of the social and those furnished by the sociology of associations (comparisons, for that matter, which abound in social studies of science). This omission is significant in view of the book's subtitle: 'An Introduction to ANT', which suggests that the book can be used to interest those unacquainted with ANT—like a travel guide to the social that describes the territory but is not the territory itself, and whose maps should not be confused with the landscape.

The absence of references to 'classical' sociological theory transforms the travel book into an adventure for the reader. But it also, I believe, reduces its attractiveness by not using (except critically) the lexicon to which the majority of students and researchers are accustomed. Accordingly, the translation of the sociology of the social into the sociology of associations, of which Latour (on his own admission) is one of the main proponents, has not yet been accomplished.

All those present thank Maurizio for his presentation. But, I ask them, what effect has the book had on them?

The person next to me replies: 'I don't read Latour, I can't stand him ... starting with that language!' Someone else says: 'My impression is that he's stating the obvious, the trivial, using pretentious terminology, but then ...'. Another declares: 'I found the book useful because it helped me re-assemble, not the social, but what I'd studied before'. 'To me it seems excessively similar to other books', says yet another of those present, 'concepts like "socio-material practices" (by Wanda Orlinkowsky), or "technology-in-use" (by Lucy Suchman) ... in what way ANT is different. I see too many similarities.'

I give my opinion. Probably, I say, something else taken for granted about scientific theories is that they must be mutually exclusive and used oppositionally. In a certain sense, also Latour's book takes this for granted (beginning with its development of a terminology that distinguishes 'sociology of associations' from 'sociology of the social'). But from another point of view the book demonstrates that there is no need to erect a wall around theory so that no others can enter and colonize an entire disciplinary field (like that of science and technology studies).

The discussion continues at the bar, where perhaps because of the caffeine, or because of the sunshine and the spring air, I suggest to Maurizio that he should reassemble the morning's session into a review of Latour's book. The result of the re-assembly you have already read; now all you have to do is perform the book by reading and discussing it. After all, what is the purpose of scientific books if not to prompt us to discuss, draw connections, regroup, and dispute the taken-for-granted of us all?

Note

1. Please note: not of sociology of the past 20 years, but of sociology in its entirety.

References

Latour, Bruno (1996) *Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches* [A Small Reflection on the Modern Cult of 'Factish']. Montargis: Synthélabo Groupe/Les Empecheurs de penser en rond.

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The Future of Knowledge Management

BIRGIT RENZL, KURT MATZLER and HANS HINTERHUBER (eds). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 273 pp. £55 (hbk) ISBN 139781403947604

Edited by three organizers of the fifth Organizational Knowledge, Learning and Capabilities (OKLC) conference, this book is smartly titled for any reader who wants to know the future of knowledge management. Contributors to the book are distinguished conference presenters who join the valuable forum for debating the issues presented here. The book provides a selection of chapters dealing with fundamental issues in knowledge management, and it is divided into three parts. Part 1, on new perspectives on knowledge and learning, is made up of five chapters. Part 2 deals with emerging issues in knowledge and innovation in another five chapters, and managing the knowledge-based company is discussed in Part 3 in three chapters.

The editors remind us that there was a widespread diffusion of knowledge management literature during the late 1990s, and they wonder whether knowledge management is just another management fad. Many of the contributors are researchers in knowledge management and innovation. The theoretical perspectives of market orientation and innovation have been discussed in depth. This book is useful to set a rich research agenda on the knowledge management topic. Someone looking to stimulate, distribute and implement knowledge management in their organization immediately, could perhaps only use a few chapters, such as Chapter 2, 'Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning: Fundamental Concepts for Theory and Practice', for 'guidance' in implementing knowledge management. Five learning cycles in the embedding of new knowledge into the ways an organization works are described in this chapter: (1) individual learning cycle (individuals in organizations create new knowledge); (2) individual/group learning cycle (they interact with, share, test and accept or reject knowledge developed by individuals); (3) group learning cycle (groups interact with other groups to determine whether new knowledge will be accepted within the overall organization); (4) group/organization learning cycle (new knowledge accepted at the organizational level is embedded in new processes, systems and the culture of an organization); and (5) organization learning cycle (new knowledge embedded in new processes, systems and organizational culture leads to new patterns of action by groups and individuals). Knowledge management theory and practice today are really part of a broad movement away from the presumption that management is the sole 'brain' of the organization to the assumption that building a broadly based *collective intelligence* among all participants in an organization (including, but not limited to, managers) is the essential task of management. Knowledge management presumes that managers are not the only people who can have useful ideas in an organization, thus managers