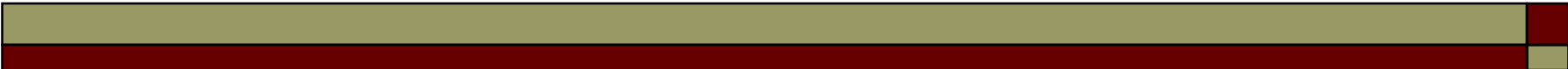


Session 9

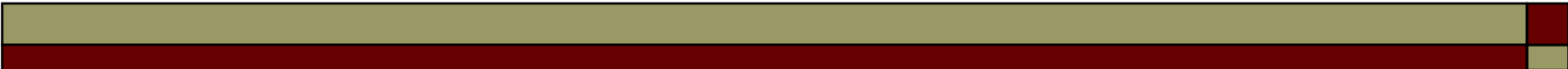
Museums – Networks, Agents and Objects

Dr Katharina Zinn (Associate Professor in
Egyptian Archaeology and Heritage)
University of Wales Trinity Saint David



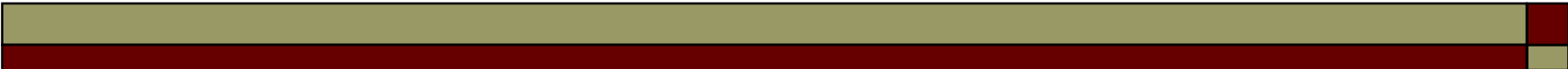
Actor-Network-Theory (ANT)

- ❑ sociological theory
- ❑ developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law
- ❑ distinguished from other network theories as it contains not merely people, but objects and organizations → assigns agency to both human and non-human actors (e.g. artifacts)
- ❑ collectively referred to as actors, or sometimes actants
- ❑ ANT = framework and systematic way to consider the infrastructure surrounding technological achievements



Actor-Network-Theory (ANT)

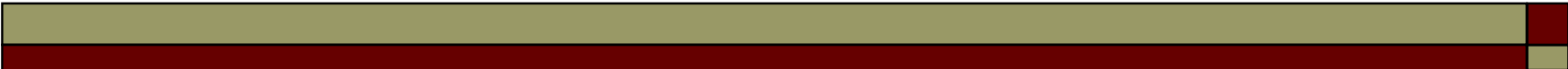
- ❑ does not typically attempt to explain why a network exists → more interested in the infrastructure of actor-networks, how they are formed, how they can fall apart, etc.
- ❑ **primary principle:**
- ❑ concept of the heterogeneous network: network contains many dissimilar elements
- ❑ = coextensive networks: comprised of both social and technical parts
- ❑ Especially: social and technical are treated as inseparable



Actor-Network-Theory (ANT)

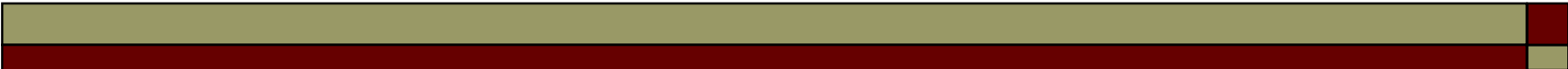
- **Example:**
- buying produce from a supermarket:
- ANT involved would include
 - purchaser
 - Cashier
 - cash register
 - Money
 - produce involved
 - BUT ALSO: less obvious objects (clothes the purchaser wears – without which they would most likely not be served)





principle of generalized symmetry

- ❑ incorporated by ANT
- ❑ describes that human and non-human (e.g. artifacts, organization structures) should be integrated into the same conceptual framework and assigned equal amounts of agency
- ❑ gains a detailed description of the concrete mechanisms at work that hold the network together, while allowing an impartial treatment of the actors

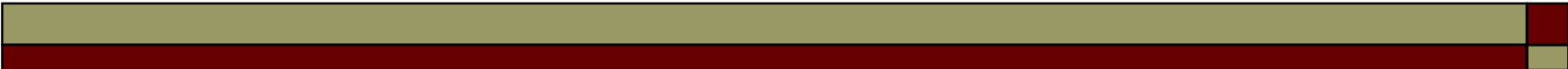


Actor-Network-Theory (ANT)

- ❑ Identification of all heterogeneous elements in an actor-network = difficult → up to the discretion of the researcher
- ❑ known as problem of selection
- ❑ Actor-network theory claims that any actor, whether person, object (including computer software, hardware, and technical standards), or organization, is **equally important to a social network.**

Criticism

- various criticisms:
 - (1) the absurdity of assigning agency to nonhuman actors
 - (2) that ANT is amoral
 - (3) that because it assumes all actors are equal within the network, no accommodations for power imbalances can be made
 - (4) that ANT leads to useless descriptions that seem pointless



Actor-Network-Theory (ANT)

- ❑ **social network**
- ❑ Societal/community order = caused by smooth running of an actor network
- ❑ Order breaks down when certain actors = removed
- ❑ → removal of telephones, banks or the president may all result in significant break-downs in social order

What would this theory mean for museums?

- Byrne, p. 4
- *Museums are simultaneously social AND material*