

Editorial Preface

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Dear readers,

The third number of the journal 2016 edition is in your hands. By tradition it comprises four Actor-Network Theory related articles. The first one advances important theoretical and methodological issues that lies in the core ANT approach, and the other three are interesting ANT case studies of innovations in agro-food industry (introduction of new type of lemongrass tea in Manipur, India), in modern molecular biology based medicine (control of vancomycin-resistant enterococci outbreaks in Canadian hospitals), and in the field of public policy (the process of achieving new agreement between government and trade unions in Jamaica). Interesting enough all three studies apply the ANT “four stages of translation process” model, developed by Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and Madeleine Akrich, as one of key instrument in their analysis, two of them in integration with other approaches.

We have the chance and intellectual pleasure to open the volume with an article of Prof. Graham Harman, where he elaborates on his new book titled *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory*, published by Polity Press earlier this year. The book throws one of the most serious challenges to ANT till now. There Harman develops further the critique of what I call the ‘excessive relationism’ of ANT – i.e. defining the actors entirely in terms of the properties they manifest in given set of interactions. The book also expands his arguments against the ‘naïveté’ of materialism.¹ Using an original set of earlier developed concepts (undermining, overmining, and duomining) he reveals the complementarity of ‘reductionist’ natural sciences, materialism and ‘constructivist’ materialism of social sciences, and argues in favor of an original and very interesting approach called ‘immaterialism’. Keeping in mind John Law insistence about deep relationship between ANT and empirical fieldwork,² I highly appreciate the *empirical backing* of author’s arguments (the study of Dutch East India Company) and exploratory *research methodology* Harman develops, based on the latest findings in non-Darwinist evolutionary biology (and using concepts such as: symbiosis, ripeness, decadence). In the paper, he responds for the first time on Bruno Latour’s critique of this new research methodology, by pointing out that the key concepts behind it are related with biographical, rather than biological metaphor.

The second paper of Wairopkam Premi Devi and Hemant Kumar examines the innovation processes in Cymbopogon Citratus or lemongrass Tea (CC Tea) in Manipur, India, the authors in fact provide us with one of the not so many ethnographic studies of indigenous innovation process in the developing countries from ANT perspective. Their case brings something of the intellectual flavor of famous studies of the *Scallops at St. Brieuc Bay* by Michel Callon or Madeleine Akrich case of Gasogene in Costa Rica. The authors are creatively applying some of the key concepts of Callon research strategy (actor-world, the four stages of the process of translation, etc.), but they also used more recent ANT inspired research. This allows them to refine the initial translation model using some elaborations on its by Arthur Tatnall. They begin with an engaging account about the story of CC Tea innovation - from the original idea of the individual entrepreneur, through the moving case of his wife providing initial capital by mortgaging her jewelry funds, through the R&D services get from laboratory in Delhi and successful certification by India food control authorities, the establishment of the company, first large-volume production, indigenous marketing plan in school &

colleges relating innovation with environmental ‘planting million trees’ campaign, through the further accumulation of capital, learning and improvement of technology used and final market success. But in the moment when the reader comes to think about the seeming linearity of this process, the author make methodological turn and following Callon and Tatnall skillfully identify CC Tea four moments of translation and the events that led to each of them, thus revealing the complexity of the emerging actor-network. Yet the linearity persists and somehow the reader is left to guess about the apparent uncertainty and possible alternative paths of development that surely have been present when applying the mobilization efforts needed to keep the network growing. Special efforts are needed to control our privilege position of knowing the outcome and the best ANT accounts oppose the traditional ‘histories of the winners’. ANT strength is precisely in revealing the plurality of accounts and the inherent uncertainty of the actor-network development in every ‘trials of strengths’. Yet it is not at random that there are few ANT accounts of unsuccessful stories and they are not among the most popular (take for example Callon study of the research lab behind the French electric vehicle project from 1970s). It is precisely in such uncertain situations when the persistence and endurance of human actors come to the fore, breaking sometime the symmetry between the actors that ANT sometimes excessively favors.³

Based on previously developed original theoretical frame, Randa Attieh, Marie-Pierre Gagnon and Geneviève Roch from Université Laval in Canada together with Sarah L. Krein from University of Michigan, USA, presents the results of an ethnographic study of new technology adoption in the field of contemporary evidence-based medicine. To test their conceptual model, they have studied a hospital implementing a specific type of biotechnology (Polymerase Chain Reaction, or PCR) to control and prevent the outbreaks of specific antibiotics-resistant bacteria. As demonstrated by previous studies in the field, the introduction of this new technology significantly improves the ability of medical organization to rapidly detect the outbreaks and took time measure for prevention and control. However, these studies have suggested that efficiency of technology adoption strongly correlate with the ability of organization to reorganize its inherited routines, practices and organization structures, as well the ability to redefine the set of other technologies already in use. The authors claim one need a clear theoretical frame in order to successfully understand these changes and their effects on healthcare practices and patients. They named their frame “the Translating Infection Prevention into practice (TRIP) model”, integrating elements of Actor-Network Theory and E. Rogers model of diffusion of innovation (DOI), where the ANT ‘four step in translation’ models are combined with the Rogers’ approach, which focuses on decision for adoption of new technology, its implementation and emerging spin-off effects. The authors claim that ANT model help to understand in more details the wider set of actors involved in the process of adoption of new technology after the initial decision was taken and how the new technology is being translated into the organization’s professional medical practices. They analyzed three particular sites the new PCR technology was applied in the hospital they studied. Implementing the combined TRIP-ANT approach, the authors come to quite interesting results precisely due to the application of ANT to the “micro-context, of technology adoption. Some of these results confirmed findings already available in literature, but other reveal new aspects of the adoption process, such as the strengthening of or emergence of contradictory elements in the existing hierarchies of roles and responsibilities, frustration in some actors concerned because of being ignored in the stage of adoption decisions, unexpected work overload, etc., which if not managed may lead to open or hidden resistance. The study also deliver important methodological messages such as the problem of “lack of methodology or instructions on how to make [ANT] theory operational”; or the contradictory effect of the wide acceptance of Rogers’s DOI approach among the hospital managers, where its narrow focus on innovation attributes & factors, and the somewhat simplistic descriptions leave important actors and interactions out of the picture.

The last paper of Carol Nelson from University of the West Indies, Jamaica, applies ANT approach to the field of public policy. It analyzes the deliberations between Confederation of Trade Unions and Government of Jamaica about the size of the public sector and wage expenditure. The

process ended with signing a special Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), where Trade Union gave some concession to Government in exchange for no redundancies. Applying the core set of ANT concepts and tools to this particular subject, Nelson finds limitations, some of which have indeed been a subject of prolonged debates inside ANT and with its critiques – about the “flat view of human agents reducing them to effects, denying the embodied, emotional nature of human existence” (Mutch, 2002), or the relative neglect of the long-term power effects of networks related with the distribution equalities and inequalities (Couldry, 2004). These are important issues indeed and the interesting fact is that they are usually related with applying ANT in more traditional areas (such as media studies and studies of labor and organizations). Other limitations the author found, however, seem to miss the point since although he cites one of the key article of Latour on “recalled ANT”, I have the impression that in some important sense ANT is still considered as ‘sociology of networks of agents’ rather than (as)sociology of actor-network, where the very ‘actant-ness’ is a network effect and not a pre-given attribute of the agent. In this sense staying in the basic methodological principles of ANT we are not into position to grand human agents with any properties that are not manifested in the (semiotic) analysis of the traces they leave in the texts, in a broader sense. This includes the assumption of “independent choice and agency by the human actors in network relations”.⁴ Hence the strange claim that ANT downplays the “significance of the social,” which is reflected also in rather limited use of relevant ANT notions of mediator and intermediary (in fact the first is missing at all). Yet during her analysis Carol Nelson hints on this when defining MoU Agreement both as an intermediary and an actor if its own and the paper did provide a thick description of its agency that changes the already established actor-network and creates ‘sociality’ of its own. The rather limited empirical section of the papers, however, does not provide much support on this original finding. These thoughts only points to the seriousness of theoretical and methodological questions the article rises, including the interesting attempt to combine ANT approach with elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that indeed reflect the peculiar subject of her study.

I will conclude with restating my previous remark about new challenges to the actor-network theory in the studying both the founding field of science and technology, and the fields beyond it that Bruno Latour is discussing in his 2013 book. This particular book is simultaneously one of the most ambitious intellectual projects in ANT tradition, and at the same time it demonstrates some key challenges to it, including those stemming from new theoretical developments (one of which presents the paper of Graham Harman in this issues). One could also mention the intellectual efforts of Antoine Hennion, one of important authors in the ANT field, to further promote the dialogue between ANT and American pragmatism.⁵ The coming IJANTTI last issue for 2016 includes papers presenting other efforts in this direction and the Editorial board would like to encourage our authors and readers to submit papers touching key theoretical and methodological problems, alongside with interesting ANT inspired case studies and fieldwork.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Harman points the links, but also differences, of his arguments with Bruno Latour critique of ‘idealist definition of matter’ of classical materialism. (Latour, B. (2007). Can We Get Our Materialism Back, Please? *Isis*, 98, 138-142)
- ² “... it is possible to describe Actor Network Theory in the abstract... But this misses the point because it is not abstract but is grounded in empirical case studies. We can only understand the approach if we have a sense of those case studies and how these work in practice” (Law, J. (2009). Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics. In B.S. Turner (Ed.), *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.).
- ³ See for example Tchalakov, I. (2014). The Amateur’s Action in Science. In G. Kapriev, M. Roussel & I. Tchalakov (Eds.), *Le sujet de l’acteur. An anthropological outlook on Actor-Network Theory* (pp. 25 – 64). Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink.
- ⁴ Maybe this is the reason of author’s agreement with Marxist inspired critique argues about the relegation of humans downwards to a non-human status and lifting non-humans to a human status in ANT, and declares it accuses is not a true reflection of reality as everything is not equal (Castree, 2002), and that there is a “value emanating from difference rather than a homogeneity” (Watson, 2007).
- ⁵ See From Hennion, A. (2016). ANT to Pragmatism: A Journey with Bruno Latour at the CSI. *New Literary History*, 47(2 & 3), 289-308.