Decadence in the Biographical Sense: 
Taking a Distance from Actor-Network Theory

Graham Harman, Southern California Institute of Architecture, Los Angeles, USA (On leave from the American University in Cairo)

ABSTRACT

This article summarizes the author’s 2016 book Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory, outlining the book’s five criticisms of actor-network theory (ANT) and its fifteen provisional rules of object-oriented method in social theory. The article also considers Bruno Latour’s criticism of Immaterialism, in particular his view that such terms as “symbiosis” and “decadence” rely too heavily on an inappropriate “biological” metaphor that has no place in discussion objects in a wider sense. In response, the authors claims that the primary meaning of the symbiosis and decadence is not biological, but biographical.

KEYWORDS

Actor-Network Theory, Decadence, Dutch East India Company, Object-Oriented Ontology, Symbiosis

1. OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY AND ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

Object-oriented ontology (OOO) owes a great intellectual debt to Bruno Latour, as extensively documented in numerous publications.1 The development of an object-oriented social theory, then, was bound to owe a great deal to Latour’s actor-network theory (ANT).2 As I see it, there are two main contributions of ANT to social theory. The first is its flat ontology, in which individual screwdrivers, mice, or espressos can play a role in a well-told story about any given project, whereas hazy reifications such as “society” or “capitalism” must be challenged. The second, closely related contribution comes from ANT’s adherence to Alfred North Whitehead’s “ontological principle,” meaning that the reasons for anything that happen must be found in the constitution of one or more actual entities: which Latour calls “actors.”3 While other social theorists might claim to deploy these principles as well, none of them do it with such consistency or such disarming wit as Latour himself. Just try to read fifty pages of Latour without laughing out loud at least once, and for the best of reasons.

Yet in developing a social theory with more of a OOO flavor, it is important to confront the weaknesses of ANT as well. As I see it, there are at least five key weaknesses of that ingenious theory, which I hold to be the most important philosophical method since phenomenology was born at the turn of the twentieth century. In my 2016 book Immaterialism,4 I devoted the eleventh chapter to summarizing these weaknesses:

1. ANT speaks of “actors” because it reduces things to their actions, not allowing them any excess or surplus beyond what they are currently doing. But rather than being real because they are acting, things can only act because they are real. It follows that much or all of the reality of a thing might currently exist without unleashing its forces at all (97-99);
2. **ANT treats all relations as reciprocal.** Since Latour holds that actors are defined by the sum total of their relations, it follows that they are partly defined by even the weakest of their neighbors. The poor cannot merely be “oppressed” by the state, since they have some effect on the state in turn, and it follows that given the proper arrangement of actors, the poor might reverse their weakness into strength. While this can obviously happen even in revolutionary theory, Latour thinks it much easier then such theory does, since in principle all forces are on the same footing. But as the archaeologist Ian Hodder has argued against Latour, there are numerous path-dependent cases of “entanglement” in which force or dependence are not reciprocal between two entities, but travel in one direction only (99-101);

3. **ANT treats all relations as symmetrical.** This point comes from OOO’s insistence on the difference between objects and their qualities, which is absent not just from Latourian ANT, but from all non-OOO theories at our disposal. Whereas ANT conceives of actors as reacting to each other’s qualities, for OOO this is only half of the cosmos: the half composed of literal relations between things, as when we say that 1.00 Euro equals $1.06 US as of November 26, 2016. In this case we are comparing the currency’s relative quality or capacity (the difference between these terms is irrelevant here) to be exchanged for other things. But alongside such literal relations, OOO places allusive or metaphorical relations between things, and grants them a much more formidable power than usual. An easy way to see the unusual ontological status of metaphor is as follows. Whenever Homer uses his famous metaphor of the “wine-dark sea,” we simply notice that the inversion of this into “sea-dark wine” does not yield the same metaphor. Literal comparisons are always reversible: a pen is like a pencil = a pencil is like a pen; 1.00 Euro equals $1.06 US = $1.00 US equals 0.94 Euros. But wine-dark sea is not sea-dark wine. Nor, to take another Homeric metaphor, is dawn with her finger-tips of rose the same thing as the rose with its finger-tips of dawn. It turns out that there is an interesting reason for this asymmetry. In the case of “wine-dark sea,” the sea is an inscrutable entity orbited by more tangible wine-qualities. But if we now say “sea-dark wine,” there is a reversal of roles: wine is now the mysterious subject of the sentence, orbited by various nautical qualities. OOO holds that such irreversible, asymmetrical phenomena occur not only in metaphors, but also in the relations between social objects (101-104);

4. **ANT tends to treat all relations as equally important.** If a hair falls off my head or if the dangerous clown Donald J. Trump is elected President of the United States, in both cases the relations between various actors have been altered. Yes, Latour would insist he is well aware the second event is far more momentous than the first, which is trivial in its consequences where the second is possibly disastrous. But both events are ontologically of the same kind, since both entail actors changing due to their shifting relations with other actors. In *Immaterialism*, I tried to shift social theory away from this focus on external happenings and ask not about which events in an object’s life are especially noisy, but which ones are able to shift the object in question into an entirely new phase. Since this had already been done for biological evolution by the serial endosymbiosis theory (SET) of Lynn Margulis, I imported her concept of symbiosis into social theory. Since my chosen topic in *Immaterialism* was the history of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), I tried to identify some half-dozen moments when the VOC not only had some powerful impact on some person, place, or thing, but when the VOC itself entered a different phase without quite turning into a new object. Some of these moments passed in relative silence, with their grave consequences becoming clear only some years later. Furthermore, I hypothesized that the number of a half-dozen or so in the case of the VOC was no accident, but that this will be the typical number found in the lives of all entities, including the biographies of human beings (104-105);

5. **As already indicated, ANT is a flat ontology that places all real and unreal actors on the same ontological footing, as long as they have some effect on other actors.** One the one hand, this is a powerful philosophical method, useful for opposing the modernist cliché according to which the entire universe can be split up into (a) human beings, and (b) everything else, a duality that is merely the warmed-over version of the medieval distinction between (a) our Lord the Creator,
Related Content

Understanding the Implementation of IT Governance Arrangements and IT Infrastructure Using Actor Network Theory
www.igi-global.com/article/understanding-the-implementation-of-it-governance-arrangements-and-it-infrastructure-using-actor-network-theory/166599?camid=4v1a

Understanding the Advantages of Mobile Solutions for Chronic Disease Management: The Role of ANT as a Rich Theoretical Lens
www.igi-global.com/article/understanding-advantages-mobile-solutions-chronic/62999?camid=4v1a
Managing Multi-Organizational Interaction Issues: A Case Study of Information Technology Transfer in Public Sector of Malaysia
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/managing-multi-organizational-interaction-issues/50126?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/managing-multi-organizational-interaction-issues/50126?camid=4v1a)

Interfering in Hinterlands of Discontent: Making a Difference Differently
[www.igi-global.com/article/interfering-in-hinterlands-of-discontent/128338?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/interfering-in-hinterlands-of-discontent/128338?camid=4v1a)