

"Actor-Network Theory" and International Relationality: Lost (and Found) in Translation

Introduction

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Like any multiplicity, “actor-network theory” is many things: an influential current within the sociology of science and technology; a relational and anti-essentialist form of materialism; an insistence that notions of agency not be confined to human subjects but embrace objects, devices and other non-human entities; and much else besides.

Actor-network theory was initially developed as a way of making sense of the social life of the laboratory and the complex paths that scientific knowledge takes from untidy practice to incontestable “fact.” Its founders, including Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and their collaborators, have since sought to apply these initial insights to a wide range of other arenas of social and political life. In the process, actor-network theory (ANT) has given us a wealth of concepts.¹

The idea of the *actor network* itself embodies a productive tension, putting structure and agency into an intimate relationship in which the network is made up of actors who are in turn the effects of the network.

In their attention to the concrete and contested ways in which knowledge is produced and circulated ANT scholars have also pointed to the centrality of what Callon and Latour have called *inscriptions*, the various pieces of paper, devices, graphs and computer programs through which actors seek to translate the messiness of the world—the laboratory, the battlefield or the market—into useable, mobile knowledge.

The ultimate goal of those producing such inscriptions is to render the ideas and practices contained in them commonsensical—to translate them into a *black box* that no one seeks to examine too carefully.

¹ The concepts that we introduce here are used in much of the ANT literature. Several useful surveys include: Law, 1986, 2009; Law and Hassard, 1999; Latour, 2005.

Such inscriptions are key devices in the establishment of actor networks, as actors use them to *enroll* others into their projects, convincing investors and citizens of the value of electric cars or a local fishing community of the desirability of farming scallops. Actor-network theory thus emphasizes the agency of those involved in producing these networks. In doing so its advocates define the scope of those agents unusually widely, including non-human *actants*, such as scallops, hydraulic door-closers and a gamut of other objects and devices that both enable and constrain human activity.

While these concepts are all potentially very promising, we do not set out to treat ANT as a new theoretical model for international relations scholarship. To make such a move would only repeat the import syndrome so common in IR, as theories ranging from institutionalist economics to constructivism and governmentality have been brought wholesale into international relations. This is a tendency that has kept the theoretical balance of trade of IR perpetually in the red. To apply it to actor-network theory risks making ANT itself into a black box, making it more systematic than it really is and ignoring its own ambivalence about capital “T” theorizing.

Most of all, any move to simply “import” ANT would miss one of the most important insights to come out of recent debates in the sociology of science and technology. This is to take seriously the idea of a sociology of *translation*. To translate is to establish relationships of equivalence between ideas, objects, and materials that are otherwise different. If we can say that after Foucault it has become harder to sustain the illusion that power radiates out from a fixed centre, if a great deal of social theory has consequently gravitated towards an account of power in terms of heterogeneous assemblages, distributed networks and circuits, then a concept like translation becomes essential. For it is through mechanisms of translation that my interests and projects might become useful to yours, and through them that the disparate bits and pieces that make up a network, including interested human agents, pieces of equipment, animals, minerals and energy, are brought together in a more or less functioning assembly. Yet it has to be stressed that in any moment of translation there is always an element of transformation and perhaps betrayal. To act collectively, and to exercise power we depend upon the agency of human and non-human others, an agency which is often truculent, recalcitrant, crafty and self-interested. Translation pretty much ensures that, like the splintering assassination plot described in De Lillo’s *Libra*, things never unfold quite as planned.

As such, in this Forum we have invited our contributors to consider how we might translate the sociology of translation for the purposes of researching international politics. Rather than importing ANT into IR as a self-sufficient theoretical perspective, each of our contributors seeks to draw on some of its tools, provocations and possibilities, forging new connections that change our view of international politics, but also transporting the sociology of translation into new problem areas.

All four of the contributions to this forum consider what insights this theoretical approach might bring to our understanding of key empirical and theoretical issues in IR, while also raising questions about the challenges of translating ANT into international politics. Porter employs ANT to focus attention on the role of objects, power and science in global finance, while suggesting that this approach is best used in combination with others that better recognize the distinctiveness of politics. Bueger points to the promise of ANT’s methodology and theory of representation while also arguing that it remains far less revolutionary than its proponents suggest. Pouliot and Nexon identify several ways

in which ANT might enrich other related frameworks that share an emphasis on processes, relations and practices, while at the same time raising some serious concerns about the open-endedness of ANT as an analytic approach. In our final contribution to this forum, we take a rather different tack, embracing the fluidity of ANT and exploring the possibilities and limits of translating the sociology of translation into international relations.

While these contributions themselves constitute an irreducible multiplicity, together they do advance two important claims: first, that there is much in ANT that can help us understand the international, and second, that even as we seek to draw inspiration from these ideas, we need to remain attuned to their limits and gaps—to pay attention to what gets lost (and found) in translation.

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