



REVIEW: Bruno Latour. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*.

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## Latour's Greatest Hits, Reassembled

Bruno Latour. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. 328pp. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA, 2005.\*

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It seems peculiar that a non-theory, anti-method has managed to become canonical, but that is what Bruno Latour will introduce you to in his book; the post-pluralist, post-humanist attitude called Actor-Network-Theory (ANT). Drawing together heaps of controversial research, Latour resuscitates ANT after its 1999 death (see Law and Hassard 1999). Like Graham Harman's book about Latour, *The Prince of Networks* (2009), *Reassembling the Social* is the outcome of various lectures and seminars, and must be read as such. Readers looking for the second incarnation of *Science in Action* (1987) or a follow-up to *The Pasteurization of France* (1988) will be sorely disappointed because Latour's offering here is more akin to *Politics of Nature* (2004) or *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) in that the audience gets a repetitive synthesis peppered with aperçu rather than reams of deep empirical analysis, as Gubert (2007, 603) has also suggested. Conceivably, the book might be the classroom workhorse for Latour's new transnational teaching

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and research project “Mapping Controversies,” which is running simultaneously in six institutions (see <http://www.demoscience.org/>).

As Collier (2009, 82) asked, “beyond undeniably artful synthesis,” where does this text land on the bookshelf? If you are a long-time reader of Latour, then you have already read much of this book—with cleaner prose and without the tendency toward tangentialism—in the author’s other works. And, like any of Latour’s roller coaster tutorials, the reader leaves with a list of remarkable aphorisms and clever inversions begging to be cited. But the close reader will also feel privation along the way. Sure, twisting the blade in sociology’s soft underbelly is great fun, but the jolly use of complex heuristics and the freshness in turning sociology’s commonsense interpretations upside-down are notably missing, as Gubert (2007) commented. Not so much an introduction to ANT, *Reassembling the Social* is more like a “greatest hits” compilation wherein fans get the chance to sing along to remastered versions of their favorite ANT tunes. But a warning for serious ANT buffs: you may miss b-side insights from the likes of de Laet, Mol, Law, and other ANTers. And, we are not joking about singing along with Latour. Try reading the book aloud. Really. Aloud. Turn all italics into spoken emphasis and use a conversational tone—the text makes that easy with all its rhetorical questions, abundant repetitiveness, and implied lecture audience.

When read aloud, the occasional but annoying inserts of questionable relevance and extended, often floating quotations turn out to be slides projected brightly on the classroom wall. We imagine Latour using the raw material saying “See, these old guys said it that way!” without worrying if historical contextualization is conspicuously absent, and maybe without even reading them completely. It gives the reader an idea of what Latour and his students probably talked about while mapping controversies.

Latour’s bottom line: As it happens, much of contemporary sociology is misdirected bunk. Durkheim is the culprit for insisting on a conceptual apparatus involving definitively social things such as “social groups” or “social facts,” and Tarde—his main competitor during the controversies surrounding this very point—is the only one that can save sociology by returning it to a discipline bent on tracing associations (which is also a case lesson in Gieryn’s “boundary work” [1983, 781]). Latour’s admittedly self-serving historical portrayal of sociology is perhaps forgivable because, in exchange, we get to see how performativity works among sociologists (rather than just economists). Sociologists give artificial strength to ideas that were only meant to be conceptual. This debate is reminiscent of, for example, Abram’s insistence that “the state” is a concept so reified over time that people might actually believe that such a thing as a state exists other than in the abstract (1988, 58). Sociologists are guilty of this sort of performativity, but also something much graver. The “social” is used at times to explain what binds

people together or tears them apart, but sociologists simultaneously demand that the social can also be a backdrop shaping interactions that bring people together or tear them apart. Sociologists get to have their cake and eat it too; if we are paraphrasing the rant sufficiently, a point emphasized in Teufelhart and Pohler's review (2009). And this is where a review might end, and certainly this is what has been emphasized in other reviews of the book.

The book's more lasting impact, we contend, is to be found in its second half. While the first part redresses the problems of social science research, Latour devotes the second part to developing the claim that ANT might never be a readymade toolkit full of solutions for contemporary sociological theory, and instead is a workbench on which new tools can be built. In Latour's (2005, p. 17) terms, the book "is directed at practitioners as a how-to book, helping them to find their bearings once they are bogged down in the territory." New tools for tracing associations must follow three imperatives or else they will be incapable of replacing the worn-out concepts of contemporary sociology dearly in need of retirement: localizing the global (p. 173), redistributing the local (p. 191), and connecting the sites. Respective chapters devoted to these steps actually contain some novel insights even for connoisseurs of ANT. To localize the global one has to look for places in which different strands of a once-called "macro-social" phenomenon get connected. Those familiar with Callon and Latour's early work (1981) on the problem of the Leviathan will recognize the well-rehearsed idea. However, the centers of calculation now ubiquitous in modern science have equivalents: parliaments, courtrooms, and offices—all these are what Latour now calls "oligopticons" (2005, p. 181). It is in these special places that the micro-structures of macro-phenomena are crafted, and it is also there that the panorama of associations is created wherein all these local activities are made a "bigger" issue. So: "back to the lab"? Not entirely. To add more layers to an ANT study, the tangible passages must be described through which the lab (the most well-known oligoptycon of science) is linked to classrooms, policy consulting services, textbook publishings, and other oligoptycons and panoramas. In a second move, Latour redistributes the local by flattening the (social) world. Global and local are raised only long enough to articulate their irrelevance and then they are to disappear into a flat landscape only composed of associations; no more global stage, no more hierarchies of high and low, big or small. Only connections remain. This also adds a modicum of freshness to the "panorama" idea; with ANT one can see the entirety of the now flat landscape, and on it there are "plug-ins" (like those used by our browsers) that allow for certain associations to be made and shared. In a third and final move, Latour considers the way these connections work and whatever dark matter must be between them. This chapter has the most potential for further research (or abstraction). Unfortunately, it also leaves readers out in the rain. "Collecting statements," "modes of existences," and "plasma" are enticing concepts fit to overcome some of the basic problems of sociology (i.e., the

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insistence on norms and values, institutions and infrastructures, theories of social differentiation or contingency and teleology). However, Latour's passage about modes of existences is a prime example for the chapter's shortcomings: instead of picking up the line of debate about differentiation and showing how an analysis of different modes of existence can lead to interesting insights, other approaches are just disqualified (for example, Luhmann's theory of functional subsystems is condemned just for its biological metalanguage).

Even with these newly crafted tools fresh from the ANT workshop, Latour has still not gone far enough. If we have to Reassemble the Social, then why not Politics or Economics too? Why not the Law or the State or other modes of existence Latour simply allows to stand un-reassembled? As an analytical strategy, dropping the Social as a category of things is a good idea. But if we decide to take Latour seriously, then we must be equally suspicious of the "political arena" or "economic climate" too, and it surely does not mean that we empirically ignore the onto-politics of Law, Politics, Economics, etc., if these are all just ways to "arrange the collective." What is missing is an idea of how to draw distinctions between them analytically without reifying them in the process. The way that "modes of existences" and "arrange the collective" are introduced in this book leaves an aftertaste of bitter reification. How are we to distinguish between ways of juridical, economic or scientific assembling? We are left without an answer, just with the hint that this would need another book to reassemble each (Latour, forthcoming). It is a good thing that the book ends trying to be constructive and not merely de(con)structive; however, if we buy the ticket (the book) and take the ride (read it), then we deserve more—we must either deconstruct more in order to rebuild everything as a mere matter of associations or we must say that anything made of "invisible" "matter" like markets, lawsuits, incentives, management techniques, etc. is just as guilty as "the social" created by sociologists.

What's ANT's next big hit? Take your pick; there is still so much to be reassembled.

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