**Critique of Actor-Network Theory**

By Adam Stangeby

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) presents a historiographical methodology that is steeped in the post-structuralist turn. Bruno Latour offers that ANT accomplishes the dissolution of distinction between the social and material worlds, thus creating a “flattened landscape” (Zell). Michael Zell explains that ANT is a method which privileges objects as critical agents in creating, sustaining and extending social ties. Objects are participants or “actors” that exert agency in the social ties that define the network.

I would suggest that a discursive network is composed of nodes (static) and “nomads” (dynamic, social ties), where the nomads connect nodes and transmit meaning between them. Actor-Network Theory rejects dialectic relationships in the construction of the discursive network and alternatively affirms that the network is an aggregate of heterogeneous components. The principle of the theory is that the subject articulates the object, just as the object articulates the subject within the discourse. For Zell, Rembrandt von Rijn’s artwork given as gifts constructs nomads or social ties within the discursive network. Zell writes, “ANT also collapses distinctions drawn between an external social system and an inner world of subjectivity because each is considered to be in constant formation through encounter with the other”.

Actor-Network Theory attempts to set aside issues of internalism versus externalism. I would suggest that a subject and object articulate meaning in discourse very differently, such that it presents a problem for ANT. A thinking thing constructs meaning through F.A.C.E (formation, articulation, contemplation, and expression). An idea is formed through stimuli (perceptual, imagination, memory, or combinations of those categories). The idea is articulated within the mind through its faculties. The articulated idea is checked for coherence, such that mental glossolalia will not be expressed (those with dissociative mental conditions, withstanding). If the articulated idea is coherent then it is expressed as a notion or concept. The notion will have to go through the FACE process of meaning-production once more to become a concept. The notion implies some form of novelty whereby the mind articulating it must show how it fits into pre-existing discourse in order to become a concept. Meaning is produced by minds through a process such as FACE (this is the process I am offering). A process such as this constructs a spatiotemporal register dynamically and because of the checks on coherence, it could be argued that the process by which subjects articulate meaning is inherently based in dialectics (contemplation is a synthetic stage, converting notions to concepts is a synthetic process). Objects do not construct meaning through a process such as FACE, as the object need not prove to itself that it is rational prior to expression. As such, I have serious reservations on the viability of ANT as a methodology for explaining how meaning is produced in discourse.

Furthermore, objects and subjects articulate meaning differently. Thinking things (or let’s just stick with humans), tend to construct an understanding of objects through synchronic (static, ideal) meaning alone because we are anchored to the present through sensory experience. The past is hazy memory and the future is frivolous fantasy because the objects processed by our perceptions dominate the present. Objects, on the other hand, articulate meaning diachronically (dynamic, historical) and synchronically. The object has no prejudicial favouring of any particular spatiotemporal register as it does not experience past, present and future differently, because it is not a rational agent. Latour suggests that we “go with the flow” when constructing historical discourse, which is to say, that we get on the object’s level with respect to how meaning is produced. This advocacy of a flattened landscape is unintuitive and arguably atavistic with respect to denigrating our synthetic processes of meaning-production to their analytic parts. It is ironic that ANT, which affirms consolidation – a democratization of things in history and meaning – then also requires fragmentation of internal meaning-production for the self and denies us our Manichean nature mentally, of having a conscious and unconscious, as well as, an individualist sensibility and collectivist sensibility.

ANT strikes me as an attempt to bring collectivist ideology and idealism to history, putting the subject and the object at the same level. This abolition of hierarchy also begs the question as to how a theory that rejects dialectics, can at the same time embrace radical Marxist idealization. The “flattened landscape” would imply that materialism and affect are conflated – the subject is affective material. However, the object cannot rightly be conceived as affective material because it does not construct meaning with checks for rationality – a scribble on the page cannot be a table or a mountain. The object’s form limits its function and defines it – it does not “feel” beyond these limitations of form and function. The molehill doesn’t feel like a mountain, nor can we assess any proposed dimension of feeling for the molehill. ANT is a dangerous theory because it relies on pathetic fallacy whereby objects undergo a process of personification, in order to make them more meaningful for us – this is in fact a bastardization of their inherent meaning. Alternatively, ANT could dehumanize people crafting dystopic historiography. These options hint at ANT’s impulse toward tautology through a penchant for speculative ontology.

ANT certainly has a Marxist impulse, not simply through the dissolution of material base/super-structure hierarchy, but also through its initiative to remove economics from determining form, function and worth of objects (and arguably, subjects). Zell uses Rembrandt’s gift-giving as an example of how an object can defy its economic value when constructing its meaning discursively. Zell attempts to explain gift-giving as being part of an affective system of exchange, but I believe that Zell does nothing more than show that gift-giving in the Renaissance was a nuanced barter system – a kind of hybrid development between lord-vassal relationships and proto-capitalist mercantilism. Zell presents that gift-giving is a resistance to commercial transaction whereby the object enacts itself as having inherent worth. Gift-giving may be a resistance to commercial economics, but that resistance implies that the object is resisting something inherent – its economic function. Humans accumulate by nature (thoughts, ideas, memories, fantasies, notions, concepts, meaning, etc.) and it would be confusing for our minds to not see the value of accumulation projected to the material world. We accumulate material objects and that gives them economic worth within a social context.

Our seminar discussion of ANT and these issues that I’ve raised was quite productive. Aaron presented that an heirloom can be deemed “priceless” and can resist the economic material value ascribed to it by others. The heirloom mediates a social tie to the past. We added to this heirloom category, memorabilia and used the example from one person’s life of owning a Leonard Nimoy-autographed napkin. This napkin is more than its form and function when converted to memorabilia. It is not simply something to clean up a mess with. It creates a social tie to television pop culture, science fiction and other institutions, structures or people. Lori recalled Walter Benjamin’s theories on “aura” and authenticity and brought to the discussion a personal story about receiving a letter from Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau when she was a child. This class discussion did expose the impulse that gave ANT steam and it is indeed based in pathetic fallacy. The heirloom, memorabilia or keepsake is affective material only through the subject’s imagination. The object provides a synecdochally-meaningful relationship between subjects, but the object does not exert agency as affective material. These objects do not carry the affective meaning beyond the subject’s recognition. Those who care nothing for Star Trek will gladly clean their glasses or wipe their snotty nose with the Leonard Nimoy napkin. The napkin exerts no agency to affirm having affective worth beyond its form, function and economic worth.

Rebecca then raised a different issue using breastfeeding as an example of how a part of the human body can construct meaning beyond the person whose body it belongs to. Again, this seems like fallacious reasoning because it presupposes that the breast was at some point a synecdoche for the person. It would require a fetish for that to be true and fetish is an irrational mode of meaning-production whereby meaning for the whole is tied to trauma and the part substitutes for the whole through a process of fetish by disavowal from the trauma. To have conceived of the breast (or the body) as having been the person, or part of the person’s agency as a being, is irrational and therefore, fallacious reasoning. One student referred to this tendency toward fetish (synecdochal projection) in meaning-production processes as “narcissism”. Narcissism is a fetish where the shell can be articulated for the substance because there is trauma about articulating the substance. In that respect, perhaps ANT does suffer from a similar issue. In requiring denial of economic value for objects (because this structures a hierarchy that can oppress some objects), part of the object’s substance (how they can be construed as affective material by people, such as the heirloom) synecdochally substitutes for the whole. I would suggest that ANT is an irrational methodology for constructing history through its fetishization of affective materiality as being the whole substance of objects in discourse.

**Actor-Network Theory (ANT) – short in-class presentation**

Michael Zell – “Rembrandt’s Gifts: A Case Study of Actor-Network Theory”

- “paradigm of social theory”

- this method privileges objects as critical agents in creating, sustaining and extending social ties

- heuristic model for conceptualizing social ties

- objects are vectors for meaning between subjects (ie. Rembrandt’s gift-giving of artwork)

- objects are participants or “actors” in the social ties that define the network

- objects exercise agency

Bruno Latour – dissolve distinction between the social and material worlds; “flattened landscape”

Breakdown:

- discursive network has nodes and “nomads” (ties that connect nodes and transmit meaning dynamically between nodes)

- not dialectic relationships (A -> B -> A = C), but network or aggregate of heterogeneous components (A ⬄ B)

So… the principle of the theory is that the subject articulates the object just as the object articulates the subject within the discourse (Rembrandt’s artwork given as a gift constructs “nomads” or social ties within the network where meaning is constructed)

Zell – “ANT also collapses distinctions drawn between an external social system and an inner world of subjectivity because each is considered to be in constant formation through encounter with the other”

Intervention:

F.A.C.E. (formation, articulation, contemplation, expression): the subject’s interaction with the object has to be evaluated through FACE to produce meaning. We don’t just accept objects as independent actors, but instead conceptualize them through their utility in constructing our sense of reality. An object immediately impresses its form but not its function.

1) ANT attempts to set aside internalism vs externalism… but can you achieve this when objects don’t do FACE, but subjects do?

Related: Spatiotemporality, Discourse, Semiotics and Modes of Meaning-Production

Kantian *noumena*; Epsteinian *photogénie*; Saussurean *synchronic/diachronic*

Objects articulate meaning diachronically, as well as, synchronically. Humans tend to construct an understanding of objects through their synchronic meaning alone because we are anchored to the present through sensory experience (past is hazy memory; future is frivolous fantasy).

Latour “go with flow” (basically, get on the object’s level!)

Rembrandt case: artist and artwork are co-constructive agents in the performance of the networks that formed around them, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by patrons and collectors

Implication:

History would have to be deconstructed and re-constructed through accounting for the agency of objects

2) Is this achievable? Why or why not? What are the limits, reasonably or practically?

Origins of gift-giving seem to be explained by Zell in terms that describe a nuanced barter system… some kind of hybrid development as lord-vassal relationships evolved into the proto-capitalist mercantile system, and beyond that into early capitalism.

Zell presents gift-giving as a resistance to commercial transaction whereby the object enacts itself as having inherent worth. It facilitates the formation of social ties (ANT).

3) Are objects necessarily narrowly-defined through economic structures? Can the object with monetary value/worth defy the economic utility we ascribe to it as its primary function? Can the object overcome this resistance and exert agency through its content, form or ancillary functions? (perhaps Duchamps’s Urinal and other Dadaist artwork speaks to this issue)

4) If we are speaking of social ties, is it sufficient to only have textual-based primary documents such as letters to rely on for historical analysis? Perhaps there are discussions/conversations at functions, parties, etc., where the object is imbued with new meaning as mediator in a social tie. In some ways history has focused on form, content and context because they are quantified aspects of an object. How do we account for the qualified aspects without all of the relevant data? Does it not constitute a dogmatic approach to constructing history?

Resolution:

Carlson “frames of meaning” (Edison and the kinetoscope)

The frame of meaning for the subject constitutes the methods by which meaning is decoded for the social ties between subject and object.

Concept: interstitial discursive regions