Chapter 13
Talking about Associations and Descriptions or a Short Story about Associology

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ABSTRACT

In 1999, Bruno Latour advocated for "abandoning what was wrong with ANT, that is 'actor,' 'network,' 'theory' without forgetting the hyphen." However, it seems that the "hyphen," which brings with it the operation of hyphenating or connecting, was abandoned too quickly. If one investigates what something is by asking what it is meant as well as how it emerges, by (re-)tracing the strategy in materials in situated practices and sets of relations, and, by bypassing the distinction between agency and structure, one shifts from studying "what causes what" to describing "how things happen." This perspective not only makes it necessary for us to clarify the changing positions and displacements of human and non-human actors in the assemblage, but, also question the role (the enrolment) of the researcher him/herself: What kind of "relation" connects the researcher to his/her research and associates him/her with the subject, how to prevent (or not) his/her own involvement, and, to what degree s/he ignores the relationality of his/her writing in a "sociology of association?"

INTRODUCTION

[R]elative relativism (or relationism) that sticks to the empirical task of tracing the establishment of relations (Latour, 1999, p. 120)

Relativism is not the relativity of truth but the truth of relation. (Deleuze, quoted in Latour, 2005, p. 95)

Emerging during the mid-1980s, the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), also known as enrolment theory or sociology of translation (Callon, 1986), is traceable through structural semiotics and into an "empirical version of poststructuralism" (Law, 2007, p. 6), it shares some similarities with material semiotics,

theories of performativity and it borrows from Michel Foucault's conception of power and knowledge, his discourses or epistemes (e.g. 1970), and from Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's notion of "assemblage" or "agencement" (Crawford, 2005, p. 3). Being equipped with semiotic tools, based on symmetrical indifference ("principle of generalized symmetry" (Latour, 1993, pp. 94-97; cf. Callon, 1986) and extended through the mobilization of interwoven human and non-human actors, Actor-Network Theory seems predisposed to exemplary case studies because it insists on relative material, strategic processes, discursive stability in networks and, at the same time, the precariousness of relations with attention to space, scale and power as an effect: "Human and non-human, meaning and materiality, big and small, macro and micro, social and technical, nature and culture, these are just some of the dualisms undone by this relationality.[1] Obviously this post-humanism is intellectually radical and often controversial" (Law, 2007, p. 8).

Related, as we have already said, to semiotics, which traditionally treats meanings as an effect of relations between signs and traces, this generalized semiotic approach goes beyond texts to the production of materials, objects and forms of embodiment, thus producing a kind of material semiotics where facts, artefacts, nature and objects are treated not as given categories outside culture or society, but as effects of interactions, syntactic relations and modes or ordering (Law, 1994), i.e. (mini-)discourses defining the conditions of possibility and rendering some ways of ordering webs or relations easier and other difficult or impossible.[2]

Situated within the sociology of science and technology,[3] the leading proponents of Actor-Network Theory, Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law,[4] created a conceptual frame for exploring collective sociotechnical processes spelled out in specific biological, chemical, economic and other case studies. From 1986 to 1990, Latour in particular defines the notion of "association" as the social, an approach that is consolidating across his work. The concept is essentially defined by three categories: it overcomes boundaries between categories, it is a power relation and it bears the heterogeneity of phenomena. Facts are not socially constructed, instead they are built through the association between human and non-human actants in "generalized symmetry" (Latour, 1993, pp. 94-97; also cf. Callon, 1986). In a flat world, with all the entities on the same level, they (only) differentiate from each other by their connections or associations that emerge from a mysterious plasma: "I call this background plasma, namely that which is not yet formatted, not yet measured, not yet socialized, not yet engaged in metrological chains, and not yet covered, surveyed, mobilized, or subjectified." (Latour, 2005, p. 244) Wanting to describe connections of "former non-social objects" that "insisted on occupying the strange position of being associated with the former social entities," the "very concept of social" shaped by Latour had to be deeply altered, a turning point marked the beginning of what "was later called ANT" (Latour, 2005, p. 106).

As a reaction to different critical voices, Latour, some 25 years later, presented a systematic introduction – *Reassembling the Social* – to the Actor-Network Theory-version of an "alternative social theory" with its "unusual meaning" given "to the words 'social' and 'social explanations'" (Latour, 2005, p. ix). In declaring that there exists "no relation whatsoever between 'the material' and 'the social world', because it is this very division which is a complete artefact" (Latour, 2005, p. 76), he refers to the redistribution of the whole assemblage from top to bottom and beginning to end. Within the framework of Actor-Network Theory, the social "is the name of a type of momentary association which is characterized by the way it gathers together into new shapes" (Latour, 2005, p. 65). Unlike most of social science theory, where social designates a kind of link or is taken as the name of a specific domain or a sort of material, for Actor-Network Theory 'social' does not refer "to a domain of reality or some particular item, but rather is the name of a movement, a displacement, a transformation, a translation, an enrolment

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