

Chapter 5

Actor Network Theory (ANT)

ABSTRACT

Actor network theory (ANT) or the “sociology of translation,” is introduced, being a systematic way to explain the mechanics and dynamics of relational interactions, within networks. The unique ontology of ANT equates human and non-human systems thereby conferring the MOU social partnership agreement with the status of an actor. The text within the MOU Agreement as an intermediary becomes the inscription, enabling the agreement to obtain having a discourse of its own and the capacity to attain a “black box” status within the network of relations that it creates for itself. ANT’s strengths and weaknesses, critiques and value are highlighted as well as its suitability to be used to analyse network relations partnering with critical discourse analysis methodology.

INTRODUCTION

The literature positions social partnership as a governance response to crisis conditions, examining outcomes and effects in terms of institutions – labour and the state, political economic and socioeconomic contexts, the types and models of partnership relationship employed and from leadership perspectives and processes. In global discourses, it is positioned as a solution to the resolution of conflict, measured as deliverables from labour and social policy making within conciliatory governance regimes which promotes nation building.

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Other dimensions that also need consideration in the analyses of social partnerships, include past legacies, leadership attitudes to dialogue, a lack of knowledge and information and other relational aspects, contributing to weaknesses in the institutionalization of social partnerships, some of which have been highlighted by Djuric (2002, 43).

institutionalization of social dialogue and new legislation alone are insufficient to offset the legacy of negative, often anti-unionist practice in the countries of this region. There are examples that tripartite institutions, although formally established, are actually hollow, ineffective, faced with the problems such as lack of willingness for dialogue, lack of knowledge for resolution of complex social, economic and general developmental problems. (Djuric, 2002, p. 43)

Other authors, Ghellab and Vylitova (2003) have identified the need to consider the attitudes of parties who should demonstrate in word and deed, the willingness to cooperate and reach a consensus and find common responses, both in times of crisis and economic prosperity. Several general and idiosyncratic factors contribute to differentiated results in social partnerships, such as the nature of the politics, the political culture, the vibrancy of the trade union movement, the immediate circumstances of each country before the introduction of the policy style and state capacity for policy management, which have also been identified by Osei (2004). These perspectives all signal apertures in the research on social partnerships and opportunities presented to legitimize alternative approaches, to facilitate greater introspection and unearth relational dimensions of partnership arrangements through Actor Network Theory.

Actor Network Theory to be discussed, possesses an ontology that confers agency on all the actors that converge within the network of relations. This ontology is unique in that inanimate objects are also included as well as the subjects or social actors. ANT also explains the mechanics of and power relations within networks becoming a lens through which to analyze the nature of the linkages and interface within the network, which is denoted as being discursive, between the actors.

Critical discourse as another intervening dimension and used as a unit of analysis, traverses and integrates multiple focal points facilitating the integration of cultural and historical context, the past and characteristics of current relationship between the parties, qualitative aspects of structures,

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