1. Agnosticism: “the observer … abstains from censoring the actors when they speak about themselves or the social environment. He refrains from judging the way in which the actors analyze the society which surrounds them. No point of view is privileged and no interpretation is censored”, Callon, 1984, p. 200).

2. Generalised symmetry: “We know that the ingredients of controversies are a mixture of considerations concerning both Society and Nature. For this reason we require the observer to use a single repertoire when they are described… the rule which we must respect is not to change registers when we move from the technical to the social aspects of the problem studied”

3. Free association: “Instead of imposing a pre-established grid of analysis upon these, the observer follows the actors in order to identify the manner in which these define and associate the different elements by which they build and explain their world”

John Law: “The desire to know clearly what we are talking about, the desire to point and name, to turn what we now call ANT into a ‘theory’, I believe that all of these things have done harm as well as good. ‘Have theory, will travel’.

Bruno Latour: “Far from being a theory of the social… it always was, and this from its very inception, a very crude method to learn from the actors without imposing on them an a priori definition of their world-building capacities”.

Michel Callon: “ANT’s main shortcoming is that it is everything but a theory – which explains why it cannot explain anything!… ANT is not a theory. It is this that gives it both its strength and its adaptability. Moreover, we never claimed to create a theory. In ANT the T is too much (‘de trop’). It is a gift from our colleagues. We have to be wary of this type of consecration especially when it is the work of our best friends. Timeo danaos et donaferentes: I fear our colleagues and their fascination for theory’.”

“This lesson is negative, to be sure” (p. 42);
“the key training for practicing ANT is negative at first” (p. 118);
“ANT is first of all a negative argument … about how to study things, or rather how not to study them (pp.141,142);
“ANT is a method, and mostly a negative one” (p. 142);
“ANT’s lessons will be only negative because clearing the way is what we are after” (p. 174);
 “[ANT] is a negative, empty, relativistic grid that allows us not to synthesize the ingredients of the social in the actor’s place” (p. 221)

On the Difficulty of Being an ANT: An Interlude in the Form of a Dialog

Professor: Tell me, can you imagine one single topic to which Bourdieu’s critical sociology, which you are so fond of, could not apply?
Student: But I can’t imagine one single topic to which ANT would apply!
Professor: Beautiful, you are so right, that’s exactly what I think.
Student: That was not meant as a compliment.
Professor: But I take it as a true one! An application of anything is as rare as a good text of social science.
Student: May I politely remark that, for all your exceedingly subtle philosophy of science, you have yet to tell me how to write one.
«Exister, c'est différer»
Gabriel Tarde, 1893.
*Monadologie et Sociologie*

**ANT as a theory of action**

For agency to be expressed and consequences produced, that is for a difference to be made, actions need to

1. involve several actors (acting as collecting);
2. whose contributions must be coordinated (acting as aligning);
3. by bending their trajectories (acting as detouring);
4. and redefining their identities (acting as being).

**4 felicity conditions of actions**

**It takes effort to become an actor**


“Relativism is not the relativity of truth, but the truth of relation”

**Actor–network theory (ANT)** is a theoretical and methodological approach to social theory where everything in the social and natural worlds exists in constantly shifting networks of relationships. It posits that nothing exists outside those relationships. All the factors involved in a social situation are on the same level, and thus there are no external forces beyond what and how the network participants interact at present. Thus, objects, ideas, processes, and any other relevant factors are seen just as important in making social situations as humans. ANT holds that social forces do not exist in themselves, and therefore cannot be used to explain social phenomena. Indeed, strictly empirical analysis would be tantamount to “detecting” rather than “describing” social activity. Only after this can one introduce the concept of social forces, and only as an abstract theoretical concept, not something which genuinely exists in the world. Although it is best known for its controversial insistence on the capacity of nonhumans to act or participate in systems or networks of both, ANT is also associated with the anthropologies of science and social theory. Developed by science and technology studies (STS) scholars Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, the sociologist John Law, and others, it can more technically be described as a “transactional” method. This means that it maps relations that are simultaneously material (between things) and semiotic (between concepts). It assumes that many relations are both material and semiotic.

Broadly speaking, ANT is a *constructivist* approach in which actors and events are seen as transforming each other, as well as being transformed by other actors and events. It is a method of analysis that is not a theory in itself. Rather, ANT defines a strategy that enables people in being sensitive to terms and the often unconscious assumptions underlying them. It is distinguished from many other STS and sociological network theories for its distinctive material-semiotic approach.

**ANT is**

not a theory of actors *and* networks, *actor + networks*

but a theory of actors *as* networks, *actors = networks* (and of networks *as* actors)

**Actor–Network Theory**

*en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Actor–network_theory*
« L'ethnométhodologie et la sémiotique sont les deux mamelles de la sciences »

« Pour moi acteur-réseau c’est une version light de l’ethnométhodologie et de la sémiotique »

« Actor-network c’est la sémiotique plus l’ethnométhodologie pour les nulles »

Entretien à Bruno Latour
"Pour Une Ethnographie Des Modernes"
Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa (3), 2008

« De l’ethnométhodologie on a enfin le déploiement des mondes, mais avec un vocabulaire qui reste très naïf sur la pratique, parce que chez Garfinkel c’est quand même essentiellement des règles, des humains, des intentions etcetera; alors que la sémiotique c’est un fantastique déploiement des mondes, mais ... l’inconvénient c’est qu’on dit que c’est des textes, et dans le langage et pas dans le monde. Alors il faut avoir le moyen de faire la combinaison ... l’ethnométhodologie permettant à la sémiotique de basculer dans la pratique, et la sémiotique permettant à l’ethnométhodologie de saisir enfin le texte comme étant account... les deux ensemble me paraissent toujours des organons essentiels de tout renouvellement des sciences sociales »

Entretien à Bruno Latour
"Pour Une Ethnographie Des Modernes"
Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa (3), 2008

« Parce que les sciences sociales pensent qu’il y a des acteurs, il y a un cadre matériel, il y a des normes sociales, il y a une société, il y a un système économique etcetera. 99,99% des sciences sociales partent d’un répertoire sur les existants du monde qui est gros comme ça. Et la moindre sémiotique, la moindre ethnométhodologie paf on commence à respirer »

Entretien à Bruno Latour
"Pour Une Ethnographie Des Modernes"
Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa (3), 2008

Actor–network theory (ANT) is a theoretical and methodological approach to social theory where everything in the social construct reveals itself in constantly shifting networks of relationships. It posits that nothing exists outside those relationships. All the factors involved in a social situation are on the same level, and that there are no external forces beyond what and how the network participants interact at present. Thus, objects, ideas, processes, and any other relevant factors are seen as just as important in creating social situations as humans. ANT holds that social forces do not exist in themselves, and therefore cannot be used to explain social phenomena. Instead, strictly empirical analysis should be undertaken to “describe” rather than “explain” social activity. Only after this can one introduce the concept of social forces, and only as an abstract theoretical concept, not something which genuinely exists in the world. Although it is based on the idea of social structures as a result of exchanges between actors, ANT is also associated with various critiques of conventional and critical sociology. Developed by science and technology studies (STS) scholars Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, the sociologist John Law, and others, it has more technically described as a "material-semiotic" method. This means that it maps relations that are simultaneously material (between things and agents) and symbolic (between concepts). It assumes that many relations are both material and semiotic.

Broadly speaking, ANT is a "network-oriented" approach in that it avoids essentialist explanations of events or inventions (i.e. ANT is a successful theory by understanding the combinations and interactions of elements that make it successful, rather than saying it’s true and the others are false.) Likewise, it is not a scheme theory in itself. Rather, ANT functions as a strategy that enables people in being sensitive to terms and the often unexplained assumptions underlying them. It is distinguished from many other STSs and sociological network theories for its distinct material-semiotic approach.

Actor–Network Theory
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Actor-network_theory
“Since the turn of the century, scores of men and women have penetrated deep forests, lived in hostile climates, and weathered hostility, boredom, and disease in order to gather the remnants of so-called primitive societies. By contrast to the frequency of these anthropological excursions, relatively few attempts have been made to penetrate the intimacy of life among tribes which are much nearer at hand. This is perhaps surprising in view of the reception and importance attached to their product in modern civilised societies: we refer, of course, to tribes of scientists and to their production of science.”


1. Experiencing (aka participant observation) refers to the direct exposure of the researchers to phenomena they study.

2. Enquiring (aka interviews) refers to specific type of ethnographic intervention that consists in asking questions to solicit information not otherwise available.

3. Examining (aka archival work) refers to the work of sieving through written documents and other forms of material records left by or about the phenomenon under investigation.


“Ethnography lets us see the relative messiness of practice. It looks behind the official accounts of method (which are often clean and reassuring) to try to understand the often ragged ways in which knowledge is produced in research”


“Paying the most commonplace activities of daily life the attention usually accorded extraordinary events”

2. Inquiring

“It could be said of ethnography that until you know the question that someone in the culture is responding to you can’t know many things about the responses. Yet the ethnographer is greeted, in the field, with an array of responses. He needs to know what question people are answering in their every act. He needs to know which questions are being taken for granted because they are what “everybody knows” without thinking... Thus the task of the ethnographer is to discover questions that seek the relationship among entities that are conceptually meaningful to the people under investigation (p. 144).”


3. Examining

“Armchair anthropology was not a passive pursuit, with minimal analytical reflection that simply synthesized the materials of other writers. Nor was it detached from the activities of informants who were collecting and recording data in the field. In the 19th century, practitioners were highly attuned to the problems associated with their research techniques and continually sought to transform their methodologies”

“Within the confines of their study, these naturalists stockpiled evidence and conducted comprehensive cross-comparative analyses of materials. They would identify patterns within their data sets, and discard information that looked untrustworthy”

“semiotics [is] the study of how meaning is built, but the word ‘meaning’ is taken in its original nontextual and nonlinguistic interpretation; how one privileged trajectory is built out of an indefinite number of possibilities; in that sense, semiotics is the study of order building or path building”


1. Describe the internal balance of forces
2. Define the actants through their action
1. Describe the internal balance of forces

RESEARCH OPERATIONS

Chose a seemingly simple object (a time-honored institution, a stable piece of technology, a successful organization, an established idea, etc.).

Show that this apparently single object is in fact a black box containing and aligning a network of actions and actors.

Describe how such a flourishing complexity is curbed (temporarily at least) through a series of black-boxing arrangements.

Reflect on how these arrangements could be modified to make them more just and inclusive.

RESEARCH PRODUCTS

overview observations

evidence of underlying complexity

traces of relational arrangements

occasions for intervention

2. Define the actants through their actions

Actant: Whatever acts or shifts actions, action itself being defined by a list of performances through trials; from these performances are deduced a set of competences with which the actant is endowed; the fusion point of a metal is a trial through which the strength of an alloy is defined; the bankruptcy of a company is a trial through which the faithfulness of an ally may be defined; an actor is an actant endowed with a character (usually anthropomorphic).


“Sociology is usually interested in the whys of the social. It grounds its explanations in somewhat stable agents or frameworks. Actor network’s material semiotics explore the hows. In this non-foundational world nothing is sacred and nothing is necessarily fixed. But this in turn represents a challenge: what might replace the foundations that have been so cheerfully undone?

... Actor network theory... responded to this challenge in the only non-foundational way it could, by exploring the logics of network architecture and looking for configurations that might lead to relative stability”

Define the actants through their actions

2. Define the actants through their actions

Shifting the focus from essence to action, purposely neglect the general differences between

1. human/non-human actors
2. individual/collective actors

in order to observe:

1. the interferences between actors of different type
2. other more specific differences

The consequences of taking a pragmatic stance

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Propp's theory in 'Shrek'.

Propp, Vladimir. 1928
Morphology of the Folktale

Algirdas Greimas' version

"actantial model" (Sémantique Structurale. Recherche de Méthode, 1966)
"canonical narrative schema" (Du Sens. Essais Sémiotiques, 1970)

Actor-network theory (ANT) is a theoretical and methodological approach to social theory where

Actor–network theory (ANT) is a theoretical and methodological approach to social theory where
Human & non-human interferences

Human & non-human interferences

Human & non-human and more specific differences

Human & non-human and more specific differences
Collective tendencies have an existence of their own; they are forces as real as cosmic forces, albeit of another sort; they too affect the individual from without, albeit through other channels. The proof that the reality of collective tendencies is no less than that of cosmic forces, is that this reality is demonstrated in the same way, namely by the uniformity of effects.

Durkheim, E. (1897). Le Suicide.

A social thing [...] devolves and passes on, not from the social group collectively to the individual, but rather from one individual [...] to another individual, and that, in the passage of one mind into another mind, it is refracted. The sum of these refractions, from the initial impulse of an inventor, a discoverer, an innovator or modifier [...] is the entire reality of a social thing at a given moment: a reality which is constantly changing, just like any other reality, through imperceptible nuances.