

Bend it like Latour

Or to (actually) use Actor–Network Theory as a research method

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Actor–Network Theory

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Actor-network_theory

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- 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"

Callon, Michel. 1984. "Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay." *The Sociological Review* 32(S1)

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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 dona ferentes: I fear our colleagues and their fascination for theory".

Law, John, and John Hassard. 1999. *Actor Network and After*.

4

To the doctoral students I had the good fortune of accompanying through some of their travails

Figure 1



Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor–Network Theory*.

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"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)

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor–Network Theory*.

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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.

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

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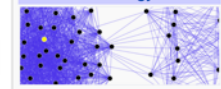
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[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Actor–network_theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Actor-network_theory)

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«Exister, c'est différer»

Gabriel Tarde, 1893.

Monadologie et Sociologie

ANT as a theory of action

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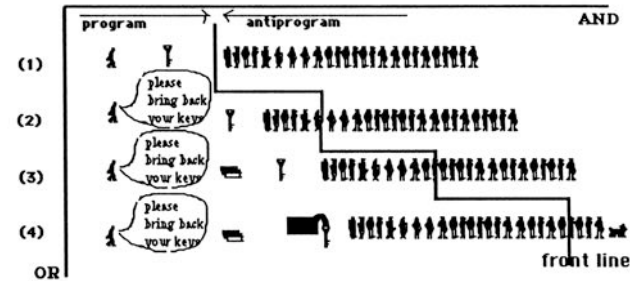


Figure 9.2

The hotel manager successively adds keys, oral notices, written notices, and finally metal weights; each time he thus modified the attitude of some part of the "hotel customers" group while he extends the syntagmatic assemblage of elements.

It takes effort to become an actor

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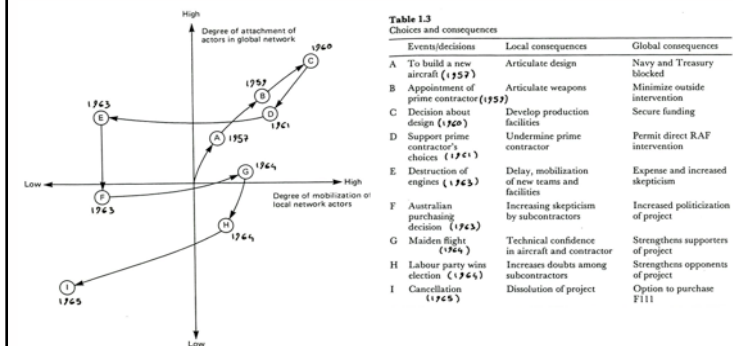
For agency to be expressed and consequences produced, that is for a difference to be made, actions need to

- (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

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Law, J., & Callon, M. (1992). *The Life and Death of an Aircraft: A Network Analysis of Technical Change*. In W. Bijker & J. Law (Eds.), *Shaping Technology / Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change* (pp. 21–52). MIT Press.



(1) Acting as collecting

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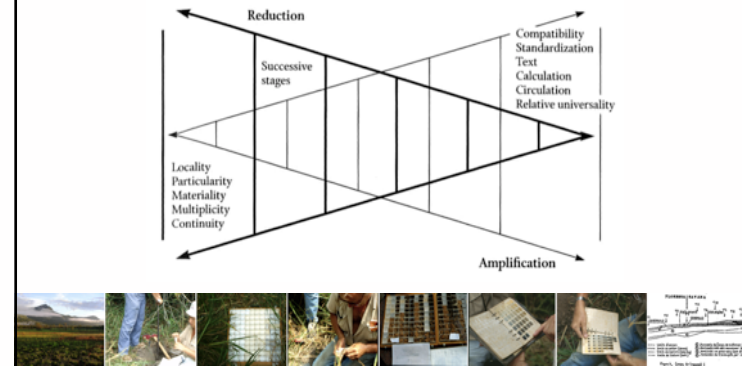
Latour, B. (1995). The "Pédofil" of Boa Vista: a Photo-Philosophical Montage. *Common Knowledge*, 4(1), 144–187.



(2) Acting as aligning

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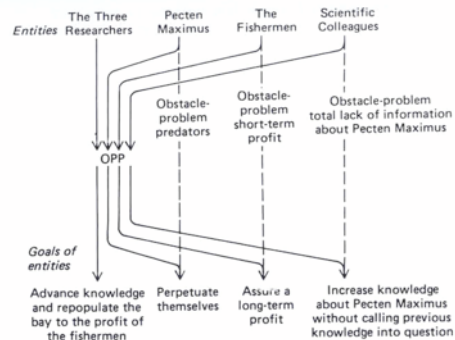
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(2) Acting as aligning

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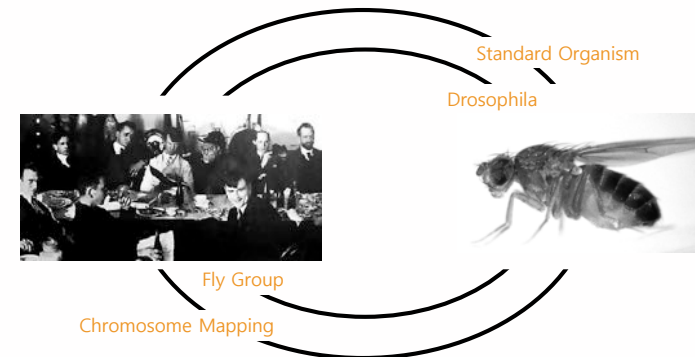
Callon, M. (1986). Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay. In J. Law (Ed.), *Power, action and belief: a new sociology of knowledge?* (pp. 196–223). London: Routledge.



(3) Acting as detouring

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Kohler, R. E. (1994). *Lords of the Fly. Drosophila Genetics and the Experimental Life*. The University of Chicago Press



(4) Acting as being

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en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Actor-network_theory

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"Relativism is not the relativity of truth, but the truth of relation"
 Deleuze, G. (1988). *Le pli: Leibniz et le Baroque*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.



Relationism

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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

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actions comme **unités** de recherche

(caractère de ce qui est unitaire) (qualité de ce qui forme un tout)

acteur - réseau

Actions as unities

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« 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 nules »

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

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« 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
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« De l'ethnométhodologie on a enfin le déploiement des mondes,
mais avec un vocabulaire qui reste très 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 que 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 »

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"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."

Latour, Bruno, and Steve Woolgar. 1979. *Laboratory Life. The Construction of Scientific Facts*. Sage.

Anthropology of the laboratory

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1. **Experiencing** (aka participant observation) refers to the direct exposure of the researchers to phenomena they study.
2. **Enquiring** (aka interviews) refers a 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.

Wolcott, Harry. 2008. *Ethnography a Way of Seeing*. Altamira Press.

Three ethnographic techniques

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"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"

Law, John. 2004. *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. Routledge.

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

Garfinkel, Harold. 1967. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Prentice Hall.

Ethnography, why

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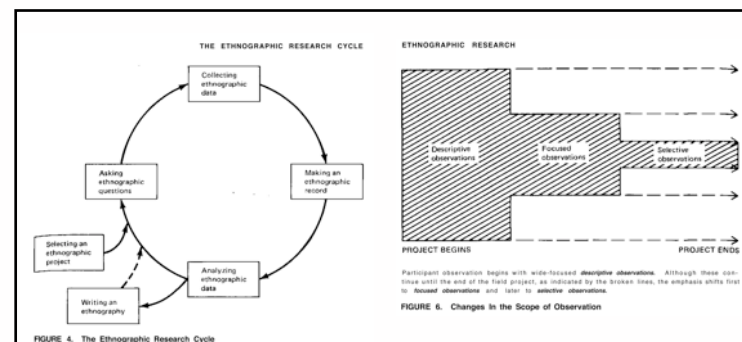


FIGURE 4. The Ethnographic Research Cycle

FIGURE 6. Changes in the Scope of Observation

Spradley, James P. 1980. *Participant Observation*. Rinehart and Winston.

1. Experiencing

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"In ethnographic interviewing, both questions and answers must be discovered from informants"

Spradley, James P. 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview* Holt, Rinehart and Winston

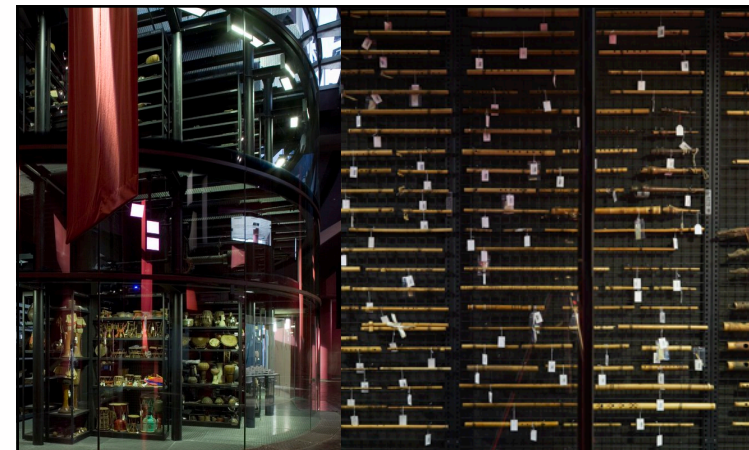
It could be said of ethnography that until you know the question that someone in the culture is responding to you can't know many things about the responses. Yet the ethnographer is greeted, in the field, with an array of responses.

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).

Black, Mary and Duane Metzger, 1965 "Ethnographic description and the study of law." In *The Ethnography of Law*, Laura Nader, ed. American Anthropologist 67(2): 141-165.

2. Inquiring

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3. Examining

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Armchair ethnography

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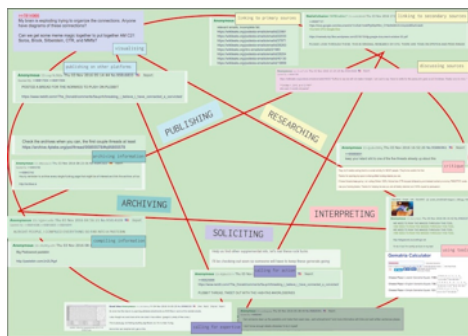
"Armchair anthropology was not a passive pursuit, with minimal analytical reflection that simply synthesized the materials of other writers. Nor was it detached from the activities of informants who were collecting and recording data in the field. In the 19th century, practitioners were highly attuned 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"

Sera-Shriar, Efram. 2014. "What Is Armchair Anthropology? Observational Practices in 19th-Century British Human Sciences." *History of the Human Sciences* 27(2): 26-40.

Armchair ethnography

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Tuters, Marc, Emilija Jokubauskaitė, and Daniel Bach. 2018. "Post-Truth Protest: How 4chan Cooked-up the Pizzagate Bullshit Introduction." *M/C Journal* 21 (3). <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjjournal/article/view/1422>.

Digital ethnography

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"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"

Akrich, Madeleine, and Bruno Latour. 1992.
 "A Convenient Vocabulary for the Semiotics of Human and Nonhuman Assemblies"
 In *Shaping Technology / Building Society*. MIT Press, 259–64.

ANT semiotic turn

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

Two semiotic techniques

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Eco, Umberto. 1962. *Opera Aperta*. Bompiani.



Eco, Umberto. 1979. *Lector in Fabula*. Bompiani.

1. Describe the internal balance of forces

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"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"

Law, John. 2009. "Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics." In *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, ed. Bryan S. Turner. London: Blackwell, 141–58.

An internalist yet non-reductive style of description

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RESEARCH OPERATIONS	RESEARCH PRODUCTS
Chose a seemingly simple object (a time-honored institution, a stable piece of technology, a successful organization, an established idea, etc.).	overview observations
Show that this apparently single object is in fact a black box containing and aligning a network of actions and actors	evidence of underlying complexity
Describe how such a flourishing complexity is curbed (temporarily at least) through a series of black-boxing arrangements	traces of relational arrangements
Reflect on how these arrangements could be modified to make them more just and inclusive	occasions for intervention

1. Describe the internal balance of forces

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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).

Akrich, Madeleine, and Bruno Latour. 1992. "A Convenient Vocabulary for the Semiotics of Human and Nonhuman Assemblies" In *Shaping Technology / Building Society*. MIT Press, 259–64.

2. Define the actants through their actions

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Propp, Vladimir. 1928 *Morphology of the Folktale*

Character Types	Definition	Example
The Hero	The Hero is the character that is often looking for something, who is on some sort of a quest or journey, who is often looking for a magic object. A good example could be Shrek.	
The Villain	The Villain is the character who stops the Hero from achieving his goal. The villain will do anything to stop the Hero from achieving his goal. A good example could be the dragon in Shrek.	
The Donor	The Donor is the one who gives the Hero something that is needed to achieve his goal. The Donor is often a wise old man or woman.	
The Princess	The Princess is used as a prize of reward for the Hero. The Princess is often a beautiful young woman.	
The Princess's Father	The Princess's Father is the father of the Princess. He is often a king or queen.	
The Helper	The Helper is the one who helps the Hero. The Helper is often a magical creature or a wise old man or woman.	
The False Hero	The False Hero is the one who tries to take the Hero's place. The False Hero is often a jealous or greedy character.	

Propp's theory in 'Shrek'.

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, Star Wars A New Hope; synopsis

Harry Potter
 Luke Skywalker is an orphan living with his uncle and aunt on the remote wilderness of Tatooine.
 He is rescued from slavery by wise, bearded Ben Kenobi, who turns out to be a Jedi-Knight.
 Ben reveals to Luke that Luke's father was also a Jedi-Knight, and was the best pilot he had ever seen.
 Luke is also instructed in how to use the Jedi-light sabre as he too trains to become a Jedi.
 Luke has many adventures in the galaxy and makes new friends such as Han Solo and Princess Leia.
 In the course of these adventures he distinguishes himself as a top X-wing pilot in the battle of the Death Star, making the difference that secures the Rebels victory against the forces of evil, the Empire.
 Luke also sees off the threat of Darth Vader, who we know murdered his uncle and aunt.
 In the finale, Luke and his new friends receive medals of honour.

2. Define the actants through their actions

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

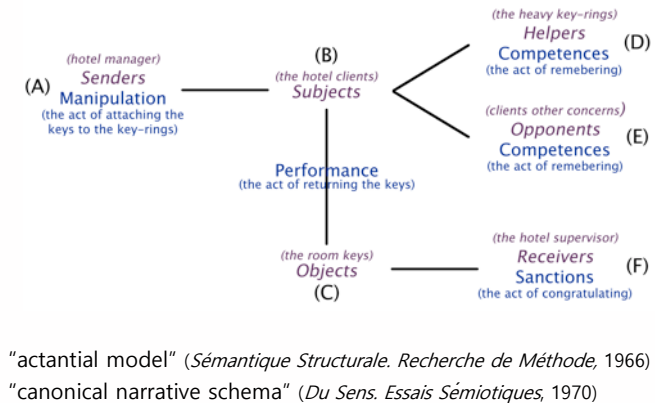
1. human/non-human actors
2. individual/collective actors

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

Algirdas Greimas' version

42

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 social 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.^[1] Although it is best known for its controversial insistence on the capacity of nonhumans to act or participate in systems or networks or both, ANT is also associated with forceful 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 can more technically be described as a "material-semiotic" 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 that it avoids **essentialist** explanations of events or innovations (i.e. ANT explains a successful theory by understanding the combinations and interactions of elements that make it successful, rather than saying it is true and the others are false).^[2] Likewise, it is not a cohesive theory in itself. Rather, ANT functions as a strategy that assists people in being sensitive to terms and the often unexplored assumptions underlying them.^[3] It is distinguished from many other STS and sociological network theories for its distinct material-semiotic approach.

Anthropology	
Outline · History	
Types	[show]
Archaeological	[show]
Biological	[show]
Social · Cultural	[show]
Linguistic	[show]
Research framework	[show]
Key concepts	[show]
Key theories	[show]
Lists	[show]
V · T · E	
Sociology	
History · Outline · Portal: Society · By country	
Main theories	
Conflict theory · Structural functionalism · Symbolic interactionism	

Actor–Network Theory en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Actor-network_theory

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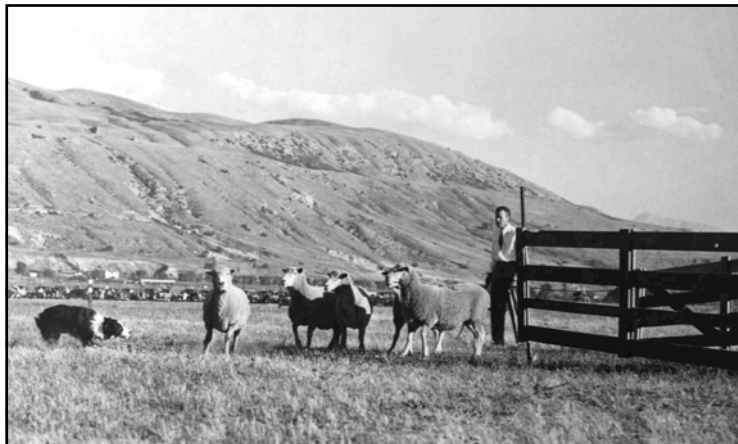
Human & non-human
interferences

45



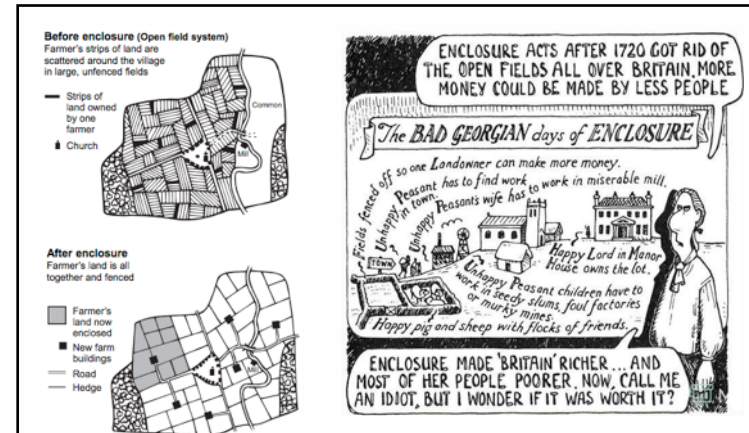
Human & non-human
interferences

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Human & non-human
and more specific differences

47



Human & non-human
and more specific differences

48

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 social 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.^[1] Although it is best known for its controversial insistence on the capacity of **nonhumans** to act or participate in systems or **networks** or both, ANT is also associated with forceful 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 can more technically be described as a "material-semiotic" 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.

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Anthropology

Outline · History

Types [show]

Archaeological [show]

Biological [show]

Social · Cultural [show]

Linguistic [show]

Research framework [show]

Key concepts [show]

Key theories [show]

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V · T · E



Sociology

History · Outline · Portal · Society · By country

Main theories

Conflict theory · Structural functionalism · Symbolic interactionism

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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.

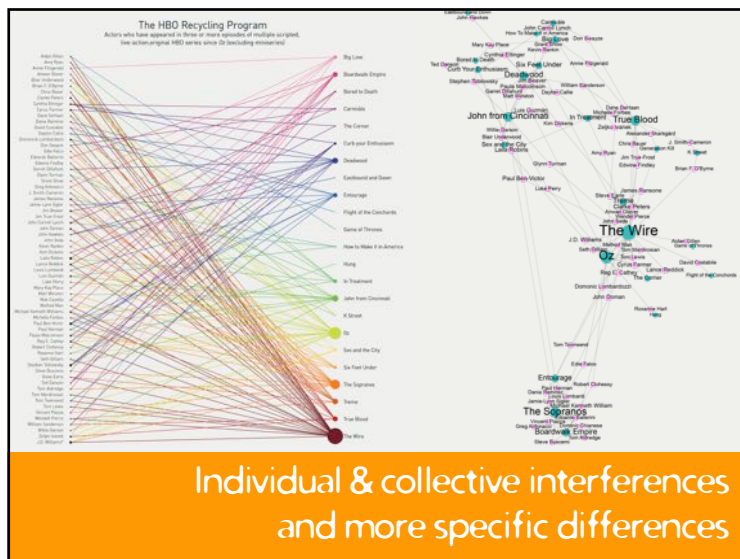
Durkheim, E. (1897). *Le Suicide*.

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.

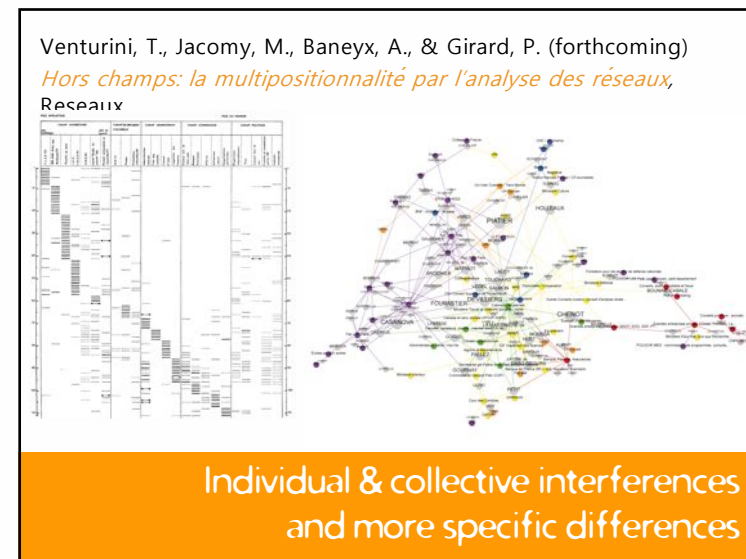
Tarde, G. (1995). *Les Deux éléments de la sociologie*

social structures VS repetition and variation

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