Keynote Speech: On Recalling ANT

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Thank you for asking someone who never used the word actor-network to speak at the introduction of this meeting.

I guess that the division of labor between John and I is that, according to the title of the conference, since he has talked about `ANT' , thus my topic must be `and after'.

Hopefully there is a life after ANT and, like Antony I can say `I am not here to praise ANT but to bury it'. Let us do it properly so that from the ashes something else can ressuscitate.

There are four things that do not work with actor-network theory; the word actor, the word network, the word theory and the hyphen! Four nails in the coffin.

The first nail in the coffin is I guess the word `network' as John as already mentioned. This is the great danger of using a technical metaphor slightly ahead of everyone's common use. Now with the Web everyone believes they understand what a network is. 20 years ago there war still some freshness in the term.

What is the difference between the older and the new usage? Network at the time clearly meant a series of transformations -translations, transductions-; now, on the contrary, it clearly means a transport **without** deformation, an instantaneous, unmediated access to every piece of information. That is exactly the opposite of what we meant. The double click has killed the last bit of critical edge left in the notion of network. I don't think we should use it anymore.

The second nail in the coffin is the word actor in its hyphenated connection with the notion of net. From day one, I objected to the hyphen because inevitably it would remind sociologists of the agency/structure cliché, or `pont aux ânes' as we say in French.

The managerial, engineering, machiavelian, demiurgic character of ANT has been criticized many times and by many people in this room. More exactly, critiques have alternated, quite predictably, between the two poles one turned around the actor, the other turned around the network; the first critiques have insisted on the demiurgic, male like, hairy gorilla character; the second on the dissolution of humanity into a field of forces where morality, humanity, psychology was absent; demiurgy on one side; death of man on the other.

No matter how prepared I am to criticize the theory, I still think that these two symmetrical critiques are off target. The idea was never to occupy a position into the agency/structure debate, not even to **overcome** this contradiction. Contradictions should not be overcome, but ignored or bypassed. But I agree that the hyphenated term made impossible to see clearly the bypass operation that has been attempted.

Let me take a few minutes to refocus the argument. Let us abandon the actor and the network altogether and pay some attention to two operations, one of **framing** and one of **summing**.

Social sciences have always alternated, yes, but not so much between actor and system, or agency and structure. The alternation is different; it is a **dissatisfaction** with the micro level that forces the attention away to concentrate on what has made the situation what it is; then when we move the attention to society, norms, values, culture, etc., there is a second disatisfaction; the asbtraction of those terms seem too great, and then, by a second move, attention is shifted away to the micro level, to the incarnated, in the flesh practice.

It seems to me that ANT is simply a way to pay attention to these two disatisfactions not again to overcome them or to solve the problem, but to follow them elsewhere: may be the social has this bizarre property not to be made of agency and stucture at all, but to be a **circulating** entity. The double disatisfaction is thus the results of trying to picture a trajectory, a movement, by using a couple of opposition between two notions, micro and macro, individual and structure, which have nothing to do with it.

Then, if this bypass is accepted, a few things are clarified: actantiality is not what an actor does -with its consequence for the demiurgic idea of ANT- but what provides actants with their actions, with their subjectivity, with their intentionality, with their morality. When you hook up with this circulating entity, then you are partially provided with consciousness, subjectivity, actoriality etc. I will come back to those in a moment.

Now what about the macro-social? The network pole of actor-network does not aim at all to designate Society, this Big Animal. It designates soemthing entirely different which is the **summing up** of interactions through some sort of devices, isncriptions, forms, etc into a very local, very practical, very tiny locus. This is now well known through the study of accounting,

managerial practice, panoptica, economics, anthropology of markets. Big does not mean really big or overall or overaching, but connected, blind, local, mediated, related.

The topology of the social, John is right, is rather bizarre, but I don't think it is fractal. Each locus can be seen as framing and summing up. `Actor' is not here to play the role of agency and `network' to play the role of society. Actor and network -if we want to still use the terms- designates two faces of the same phenomenon, like wave and particles, the slow realisation that the social is a certain type of circulation that can travel endlessly **without** ever encountering the micro-level -there is never an interaction that is not framed- nor the macro-level -there are only local summing up.

To have transformed the social from a surface, from a territory, from a province of reality, to a circulation, is what I think has been the most useful contribution of ANT. But the benefit are not clear yet because of a third difficulty.

The third nail in the coffin is the word theory. As Mike Lynch said sometimes ago, ANT should really be called `actant-rhyzome ontology' but who would have cared for such a horrible mouthful of words, not to mention the acronym ARO? Yet, he has a point. If it is a theory, it is a theory of what?

John and Anne Marie Mol have used the word fluid. Adrian Cussins the word trails. Charis Cussins the word choreography. All of these words designates in my view what the theory should be and what the overdiffusion of the `double-click' networks has rendered unretrievable: it is a theory that says that by following circulations we can get more than by defining entities, essences or provinces.

ANT is not a theory of the social, it is a theory of a space in which the social has become a certain type of circulation. But then, the consequence is that there is now room for other types of circulations, plenty of places.

Let us have a quick look at the modernist predicament. The whole theory of society is enmeshed into a much more complex struggle to define a pscyhology -an isolated subjectivity still able to comprehend the word out there; an epistemological question about what the world is like outside without human intervention; a political theory of how to keep the crowds in order without them intervening with passions and ruining social order; and finally a rather repressed but very present theology which is the only way to guarantee the differences and the connections between those domains of reality. It is this whole package that is in question.

ANT is not a theory of the social, no more than it is a theory of the subject, or a theory of God, or a theory of nature. It is a theory of the space and fluids circulating in a non-modern situation. What other type of connection can be established between those terms, than the systematic modernist solution? This is, I think clearly the direction of what is `after' ANT and what could begin to solve several of the worries of many of the papers here -I am thinking especially of Hans Harber's piece.

Let us not forget that the first thing we made circulate is nature and the reference, that is the left side terriotry in the diagram. I was struck to see that none of the papers for this conference mentioned social constructivism and the recent Science Wars as even an issue. Obviously, the entry into the collective of scientific reality under the aspects of a circulation of transformations -is it even necessary to say real, social and narrative at once?- is now, if not taken for granted at least clearly articulated. If ANT can be credited for something it is to have developed a science studies that entirely bypasses the question of `social construction' and the `realist/relativist debate'. It is not, it never was a pertinent question.

What I call the `second wave' of science studies has done (is doing) to the other sphere -on the right- the same sort of treatment. Subjectivity, corpolrality is no more a property of humans, of individuals, of intentional subjects, than being an outside reality is a property of nature. It is so well represented in the papers for this meeting, that it is no use here to develop the point. Subjectivity seems also to be a circulating capacity, something that is partially gained or lost by hooking up to certain bodies of practice. Madeleine Akrich work, the paper by Emilie Gomart and Antoine Hennion for this meeting -the work I am doing on ehtnopsychiatry- have all the characters of redistributing outside so to speak the subjective quality -but of course, it is a totally different `outside' now that epistemology has been turned

into a circulating reference. The two movements -the first and the second wave, one on objectivity, the other on subjectivity, are closely related: the more we have `socialised' so to speak the `outside' nature, the more `outside' `obejctivity' can the content of our subjectivity gain. There is plenty of room now for both.

What is next? Clearly political theory as indicated by a small but growing body of work - witness the paper by Dick Pels. Not a single feature of our definition of the social escapes the pressure of epsitemology and psychology. If we could elicit the specificity of certain type of circulation that is turning the Body Politic into one, that is, some type of circulation that `collect' the collective, we would have made an immense step forward. We would have freed politics from science -or more exactly from epsistemology- a result that would be quite a feat for people who are still often accused to have politicised science beyond repair! From the recent work in political ecology, or in what Isabelle Stengers call `cosmopolitics', I am rather confident that this will soon come to fruition. The poltiical relevance that academics always search somewhat desperatly, cannot be attain without a relocation of the extraordinary originality of political circulation.

What about the half hidden sphere above, that has been used as a guarantee for the rest of the modernist systems? I know this is a very risky territory since there is worse that dabbling with non-humans, it is to take theology seriously. This line of work is not represented at all, I agree, in the meeting. Yet I think that it is in theology that the notion of circulation is the most rewarding, precisley because it rejuvenates, in an incredibly fast way, a tissue of absurdities, what has become a tissue of absurdities because of the shadow cast by the notion of a Science and by the notion of Society. Morality that seems totally absent from the engineering dreams of ANT, may be very abundant if we care to take it also for a certain type of circulation.

There are of course many other types of circulation, not an infinite number I hope. Michel Callon is studying for this meeting one equally specific and that connects and coordinates action through the mediations of goods. It is also largely and unknown territory in spite of the mass of economics and socioeconomics done. I have mysefl charted several others.

The point on which I want to conclude is somewhat different from that of John. He appealed to limit ANT and to tackle seriously and modestely complexity and locality. As several of us, he is somewhat terrified by the monster that we have begot. But you cannot do to ideas what auto manufacturer do with badly conceived cars. You cannot recall them all by sending advertisement to the owners, retrofit the cars with the improved engines or parts and send them back again, all for free. Once launched in this unplanned and uncharted experiment in collective philosophy there is noway to retract and be modest again. The only solution is to do what Victor Frankestein did not do, that is not abandon the creature to its fate but continue all the way to develop its strange potential.

Yes, I think there is life after ANT. Once we will have strongly pushed a stake into the heart of the creature safely buried in its coffin -thus abandoning what is so wrong with ANT, that is `actor', `network', `theory' without forgetting the hyphen!- some other creature will emerge, light and beautiful, our future collective achievement.