



# Bruno Latour and Niklas Luhmann as organization theorists



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 17 February 2017

Accepted 19 February 2017

Available online 1 March 2017

### Keywords:

Latour

Luhmann

Actor-network theory

Autopoiesis

## ABSTRACT

Bruno Latour and Niklas Luhmann are two authors who, not being management and organization scholars, have had a significant impact on MOS studies. Their works are even more appreciated in time, yet their influence has not crossed the Atlantic. The texts of the two authors, and the predecessor they evoke, demarcate a truly European development of management and organization theory.

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“What did Luhmann and Latour do to European organization studies?” Were I writing this text 20 years ago, the question would have been “What did Foucault and Deleuze do to European organization studies?” But it is 2017, and as much as the insights of Deleuze and Foucault have been incorporated into organization studies to the point of being taken for granted, it is Latour – and ANT and Luhmann and self-observing autopoietic systems – that are the most original and visible influences today.

In what follows, I am presenting my personal view (see also Czarniawska, 2005; 2014), and will mention some of my personal works influenced by those two authors, but I hope to do justice to at least some part of a still-growing number of organizational scholars who were similarly impressed by the works of those two. I also claim that, although the approaches of two authors were innovative and can be seen as radical, they were in harmony with earlier observations of management and organization scholars.

## 1. Latour and actor-network-theory

### 1.1. How macro actors are constructed

For many decades, social scientists dutifully studied the phenomenon of power, usually assuming its existence as a starting point, and then illuminating its effects and consequences. Yet after the end of the power of hereditary monarchies, a legitimate question should be: Who has power, and why is it those people and

organizations and not the other? The question was rarely formulated, at least in English, until 1981, when two French authors – Michel Callon and Bruno Latour – published a chapter in an anthology edited by Karin Knorr and Aaron Cicourel.<sup>1</sup> The chapter's title was “Unscrewing the Big Leviathan or How Do Actors Macro-structure Reality and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So”. It began by reminding the readers of Hobbes' idea that society emerged from a contract among individuals who form an association and have their wishes expressed by a common spokesperson. In this way, a “Leviathan” is constructed. To outside observers, such macro actor – a State, a global corporation – appears to be much larger than any of the individuals that form it, and its true character – that of a network – remains hidden and forgotten. And yet Callon and Latour insisted that it is the very construction of such macro actors that needs to be studied, including negotiations, conflicts, even wars – but first of all, the building and maintaining of associations.

As I noted earlier (Czarniawska, 2017a), two sources of inspiration could be detected in Callon and Latour's chapter. One was Michel Serres' (1974/1982) concept of *translation* (moving anything from one place to another changes not only what is moved, but also the mover – the translator. The other was *actant theory* (a version of structuralist analysis proposed by Algirdas Julien Greimas). An actant is a being or a thing that accomplishes or undergoes an act; thus actants could be people, but also animals, objects, and concepts (Greimas and Courtés, 1982: 5).

<sup>1</sup> The same anthology contained a chapter by Niklas Luhmann: “Communication About Law in Interaction Systems” (1981).

The use of the Greimasian model is especially visible in Latour's "Technology Is Society Made Durable" (1992), in which he analyzed the history of the Kodak camera and the emergence of a mass market for amateur photographers<sup>2</sup>. The story is built as a story of meetings of "narrative programs" (another Greimasian term) of many actants, with Kodak as a macro actor and a winner.

But stories never end. The once powerful Eastman Kodak is now but a memory, while the Kodak Company, a micro actor, re-emerged from bankruptcy in 2014, and is trying to survive by trying new narrative programs. This turn of events is not strange, as it was not the "nature" of Eastman Kodak that made it into a macro actor in its time. It simply managed to convince many other actants to join their acts with it. Each time an anti-program was launched by competitors, Eastman Kodak managed to attract new allies, thus winning subsequent trials of strength. But digital photography proved to be a competitor too strong to win over, its network too large ...

Actor-network theory is not a theory, but an approach, a guide to the process of answering the question "How do things, people, and ideas become connected in larger units and remain so?" Indeed, the name is misleading. The more adequate term would be "an actant-net approach", but in 1981, when Latour and Callon<sup>3</sup> launched ANT, nobody knew who or what actants were, and ANT is a better acronym than "ANA." Its methodological consequences are well summarized by the "symmetrical anthropology" concept, introduced by Latour in 1993.

## 1.2. Symmetric anthropology

According to Latour, the idea came to him while playing anthropologist:

If, I told myself, those who defend the value of science can maintain such a gap between what they say science is, and what I and my many colleagues in the thriving field of science studies, through a very banal use of ethnographic and historical methods, can see it is, then it is no wonder that the 'front of modernization' that I had observed first hand in Africa and then in California, had some trouble defining itself positively. There must be something deeply flawed – and also, then, deeply interesting – in how the moderns define, defend and project their 'universal values'. (2010: 62)

Traditional anthropology used "modern" lenses to look at "premodern" societies; something that Latour found absurd, in comparing his studies of French industrial education in Abidjan and laboratory life in California (Latour and Woolgar, 1979/1986). This conviction deepened during his next study of the failed project of an automated subway called ARAMIS (Latour, 1996). That work is not only an example of how to study according to principles of symmetric anthropology, but also how to write it up<sup>4</sup>.

*Aramis or the Love of Technology* is basically a detective story. A Master and a Pupil are given a task to solve the mystery of death of beautiful Aramis, or *Agencement en Rames Automatisées de Modules Indépendants dans les Stations*. The Master is a sociologist of science and technology, the Pupil an engineer who takes courses in social sciences at École des Mines, and Aramis is a piece of transportation

machinery, with cars that couple and decouple automatically, following the programming of the passengers. Born in the late 1960s, Aramis promised to be the kind of technology that serves humans and saves the environment, yet in November 1987 it was nothing but a piece of dead machinery in a technology museum. How did it happen? Did the machines fail? Had the engineers used a wrong design? Did the politicians destroy the project? Did competitors conspire to have it dumped?

The reader gets three versions of the narrative, all realist versions, emitted by the Voices of the Field, the New Sociologist of Technology, and Aramis himself – all activated in a dialogue with a pupil – an engineer who wishes to learn his technoscience. This work, rich in textual devices, is especially interesting, because it finds an ingenious solution to the well-known problem facing all field researchers: How to avoid smothering the variety of voices in one sleek version and the kind of fragmentation that occurs when all the voices are reported simultaneously.

Not being a philosopher, and therefore with no ambitions to study *anthropos* as such, I paraphrased Latour's term into a *symmetrical ethnology* (Czarniawska, 2017b). Management and organization studies are not about human nature, but about certain ways of life, and, more specifically, about certain ways of work. Still, the approach I adopt follows Latour's precepts, which are:

- Use the same terms to explain truths and lies, failures and successes, trials and errors – in other words, render the method judgment-free.
- Simultaneously study the emergence and conduct of both humans and non-human actants. (This approach requires that greater attention be directed toward things and machines.)
- Avoid any a priori declarations concerning the differences between westerners and non-westerners, primitive and modern societies, rationality and irrationality, identity (sameness) and alterity (difference).

"Ethnologizing" management and organizing does not mean that these practices need to be mystified or demonized; it is yet another reminder of the fact that "we have never been modern" (Latour, 1993). The fact that contemporary managers engage in rituals must not diminish respect for their work; it must only change the prevalent understanding of modernity, as John Meyer and Brian Rowan already noted in 1977.

## 1.3. Reassembling the social

Latour's *Reassembling the Social* (2005) is subtitled "An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory," but it is more a summary of rather than an introduction to the approach. He intended it to be used as a textbook, although it is not written as one. Nevertheless, it is used even in management and organization courses, and translations proliferate.

Latour's declared intention was to convince social science students that they need to abandon the taken-for-granted idea that social is a kind of essential property that can be discovered and measured (a stuff of which something is made) and return to the etymology of the word. "Social" is not a material or a property, but a relationship: something is connected or assembled, in contrast to being isolated or disconnected.

The first part of *Reassembling the Social* contains a presentation of five uncertainties – positions on which ANT differs from, or is critical toward traditional sociology. These uncertainties concern the "nature" of groups, of actions, of objects, of facts, and of type of studies conventionally (and incorrectly) called "empirical." This part ends with a dialogue with a student who is confused by the difficulty of doing ANT-inspired studies of organizations. The

<sup>2</sup> Several business historians found ANT to be a useful approach in their studies (see e.g. Durepos & Mills, 2012; Ponzoni & Boersma, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Callon's influence on management and organization theory is also obvious, but it is not my goal to tackle it in this text.

<sup>4</sup> The influence of this work is especially visible in such organization studies as those of Porsander (2005) and Tryggestad (2005).

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