JPM717: Presentation Handout

Presenting Student’s Name: David Masselter

Reading’s Title: After ANT: complexity, naming and topology

**1. Summary of the Reading**

*What is the reading about? What is the author’s main thesis and conclusions?*

In his paper, John Law expresses his discontent with what actor-network theory has evolved into and elaborates on his vision for the future of ANT.

Key points:

* The term actor-network theory has evolved into a term that is too concrete and has as such deviated from its original premise.
* ANT has not been ideally named.
* Translation and tension aspect in actor-network theory has been lost as it involved some sort of transformation (a betrayal if you will) of the information.
* ANT has been simplified and watered down for the purpose of easier reproduction and spread in academia.
* To Law’s dismay, the goal of ANT has become to “centre and order from a centre” (Law, 1999, p. 5)
* In actually, ANT is not really a theory that should replace other social theories but rather an approach or methodology to assist in their study.
* ANT should address the ways in which actors interact with and transform each other.
* The goal of ANT should be to gain knowledge from the study of the transformations between actors rather than the ordering of a given structure.

In short: John Law desires for ANT to return to its original premise.

**2. Critical Analysis**

*What are the strong and weak points of the argument?*

I don’t think that John Law’s principal argument really has any weak points, as he was involved in first defining actor-network theory along with Bruno Latour and others in the 1980’s, but I think it is somewhat naïve to think that it is possible for ANT to return to its original premise. Afterall, there is nothing holding academics back from employing ANT as originally defined, rather it seems that different fields of studies have come up with adaptations for ANT that they have seen more useful in application. Does this mean that those fields would not benefit from employing the original methodology of ANT? Not necessarily, but that is beside the point. The meaning of the ANT seems to have changed, and Law’s entire argument hinges on the semantics of a composite of words which have themselves evolved over time or were poorly chosen from the beginning. In the paper Law states that: “Only dead theories and dead practices hang on to their names, insist upon their perfect reproduction. “ (Law, 1999 , p. 10) However, in trying to prevent others from redefining ANT into a more narrow concept, he seems to also insist upon the „perfect reporduction“ of ANT. Perhaps, actor-network theory in its prototpical sense is just what LAW described, a dead theory.

**3. Relation to the Main Reading**

*How does the argument relate to, and/or expand the argument of the main reading to which it is linked in the syllabus?*

Bruno Latour’s paper “On recalling ANT” was originally published in The Sociological Review: Volume 47 Issue 1 titled ‘Actor Network Theory and After’ and it follows the article “After ANT: Complexity, Naming and Topology”. The paper delves into some of the same arguments that have already been established by Law but Latour dives more deeply into the semantics of the term “actor-network theory”, and why its name may have led to the simplification and centralisation of the term. Latour also explores how ANT has injected itself into other social sciences and how it has helped them flesh out new concepts and approaches.

However, the papers significantly differ in their conclusion. Latour has a different vision for the future of ANT as he thinks that is impossible to recall it, and, by implication, also impossible to return to its original premise. It seems like Latour is in favour of letting ANT naturally spawn numerous derivatives in hopes that one flourishes into something great, rather than trying to intervene and steer ANT back to its roots. Furthermore, he thinks that the semantic discrepancies of “actor-network theory” make a return to its roots impractical.