

Is actant-rhizome ontology a more appropriate term for ANT?

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Latour mentions actant-rhizome ontology only once, in “On Recalling ANT”, his contribution to *ANT and After* (Latour 1999a). There, he recalls actor-network theory in the sense of reminding readers about the concerns that led to its development. He also claims to recall ANT in the sense of taking it back, like a flawed product. Thus, he first recalls the actor, then the network, and then theory. It is at this point that the strange term actant-rhizome ontology appears:

The third nail in the coffin is the word theory. As Mike Lynch said some time ago, ANT should really be called 'actant-rhizome ontology'. But who would have cared for such a horrible mouthful of words-not to mention the acronym ARO? Yet, Lynch has a point. If it is a theory, of what it is a theory? It was never a theory of what the social is made of, contrary to the reading of many sociologists who believed it was one more school trying to explain the behaviour of social actors. For us, ANT was simply another way of being faithful to the insights of ethnomethodology: actors know what they do and we have to learn from them not only what they do, but how and why they do it. It is *us*, the social scientists, who lack knowledge of what they do, and not *they* who are missing the explanation of why they are unwittingly manipulated by forces exterior to themselves and known to the social scientist's powerful gaze and methods (1999a: 19)

In a gesture often repeated, Latour insists that ANT aims only to learn from the actors what they do, how, and why. And he seems to agree that actant-rhizome ontology is in some sense a more appropriate name than ANT. Only the word is too ugly, a “horrible mouthful,” which would never have caught on.

While Latour sometimes likes to stress the affinity between ANT and ethnomethodology the reverse is not usually the case. Mike Lynch, coiner of the ARO, for one, is no great friend of ANT, and the term was not intended as a compliment. It appeared in his review of Geoff Bowker's (1994) *Science on the Run* that was in equal measure a series of complaints against ANT. While Bowker was

praised for his “matter of fact presentations,” his ANT colleagues were said to “engage in a kind of conceptual art long on interpretation and short on detail” (Lynch 1995: 167). ANT, Lynch’s continued, “licenses vaguely Machiavellian stories of how innovative persons and agencies manage to establish global networks” (168). If these stories had been advertised fairly as “‘actant-rhizome ontology,’ the theory would of course never have caught on in the English speaking world.” But, alas, the non-event was not to be and ANT did catch on.

Beneath the cosmetic agreement that ARO is more accurate than ANT, there is thus profound disagreement. Lynch finds silly the idea of extending agency to nonhuman actants. He evidently views the notion of the rhizome as loose and metaphoric. And talking of ontology is, for Lynch, a way of relegating ANT to the realm of the metaphysical rather than the properly empirical. The only real point of agreement is that the name ARO would have been a PR disaster.

Of course Lynch was right that ANT is not a conventional social theory. And if it is not an ontology either, it is at least a strategy for tracing, articulating and adding to the rhizomes, the practical ontologies, that make up the world (Gad and Jensen 2010). Even though ANT will never actually be renamed it thus seems worth exploring its points of intersection with, and divergence from, Deleuze and his rhizomes (see also Jensen and Rödje 2010).

Follow the References!

Follow the actors! Given the centrality of this slogan for ANT, It seems only fitting to start by tracing what Latour, the actor, has said about and done with Deleuze.¹

Following the references, however, is a less than satisfying task because Latour’s engagement with Deleuze, as with most of his intellectual inspirations, is sporadic.² Latour has referred to Deleuze as the greatest French philosopher

¹ Henning Schmidgen (2015: 6) suggests that “Even the famous ‘Follow the actors!’ the basic principle of the anthropology of science as conceived by Latour, derives from a concept of Deleuze and Guattari’s: namely, the ‘nomad, ambulatory sciences’” (see also Jensen 2012).

² Schmidgen (2015: 23) shows that Deleuzian themes were explicit even in the very young Latour. Working under the anthropologist Marc Augé in the Ivory Coast, he analyzed an “ideology of competence” in development using concepts from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983) *Anti-Oedipus*. The early Latour also made note of Deleuze and Guattari’s transversal theory of bodies and technology, which saw people as component parts in machinic assemblages (Schmidgen 2015: 103), later redefined as heterogeneous networks (Latour 1987).

(alongside Michel Serres) (in Crawford 1993: 262). Even so, references appear only intermittently and usually without much commentary (e.g. Latour 2014: 15; 2016a, 2016b: 312).

Though touched upon only casually, however, certain ideas are clearly resonant. Thus, the invocation of a “‘composite’ that ‘has to hold together on its own,’ as Deleuze and Guattari would say,” though appearing only briefly (Latour 2013: 242) is not difficult to connect with the crucial notion of hybrid networks that gain reality through processes of stabilization. Similarly, Latour’s (2005: 95n119) approval of Deleuze’s description of relativism as “not the relativity of truth but the truth of relation,” seems more than incidental, since it aligns with his own effort to simultaneously avoid relativism in the form of a social or ideologically induced ‘consensual hallucination’ and the fundamentalism of believing in truths that escape the networks that articulate them (e.g. Latour 1988a, 2000).

One of the few topics to which Latour returns more than once in his scattered remarks is the relation between difference and repetition (Deleuze 1994),³ which in particular held his attention during his Tardean interval (after the Serresian and Deleuzian phases, but before Souriau, James and Whitehead took over: as we know Latour changes intellectual predecessors at a dizzying pace). Thus, Latour and Lépinay (2009: 39) wrote that Tarde’s theory conforms to the fundamental principle of Deleuze’s difference and repetition according to which “invention produces differences; repetition allows for their diffusion,” leading in turn to conflicts that generate new inventions. Depicted as the fundamental Tardean rhythm of social activity, this is also, of course, the fundamental rhythm of Latour’s networks, which, in this sense, are markedly Deleuzian.

The network bore imprints of the rhizome, too. In a mid-90s article dedicated to “clarifying” the many misunderstandings proliferating about actor-networks already then, Latour (1996: 49) stated that: “Literally, a network has no outside. It is not a foreground over a background, nor a crack onto a solid soil, it is like Deleuze’s lightning rod that creates by the same stroke the background and the foreground)...instead of surfaces one gets filaments (or rhizomes in Deleuze’s parlance).” Ten years later, Latour (2005: 129) paused to comment that he was

³ Indeed, *Difference and Repetition* is the Deleuzian work to which Latour return with the greatest regularity (e.g. 1993: 72, 1996: 49, 1997: 179, Latour and Lépinay 2009: 39).

indebted to “a very special brand of active and distributed materialism of which Deleuze, through Bergson, is the most recent representative.”

It would thus appear that networks and rhizomes are at least close relatives. But can we be so sure? In fact, does sifting through the brief Latourian comments on Deleuze make us any wiser as to their specific import? It seems we will have to look further than Latour’s own specifications.

A Nearly Total Affinity?⁴

The introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* is organized around several principles of rhizomatic analysis. There is a principle of connection and heterogeneity: “any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 7). According to the principle of multiplicity, the multiple must be “treated as a substantive,” (8) and decoupled from “any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world.” The principle of asignifying rupture states that: “a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given point, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (9). Each of these principles is readily discernible in actor-network theory, which, as Latour (1999a: 15) emphasized, were indeed intended to convey an image “like Deleuze’s and Guattari’s term rhizome... a series of transformations—translations, transductions—which could not be captured by any of the traditional terms of social theory.”

Moreover, as Jane Bennett (2010: 17) observes, both Latour and Guattari acknowledge the “porosity of the borders between... subjectivity, society, and machines.” Henning Schmidgen (2015: 133) further emphasizes that both Latour and Deleuze broach the question of what society consists in and what holds it together with an attitude of “radical openness.” And long before Latour became famous for insisting that *We Have Never Been Modern*, and Haraway (2008) proposed that we hadn’t been human either, Deleuze (2004: 90-4 [1966]) pithily characterized humans as “a dubious existence.”

At a more detailed level there are further resonances. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze (1990a: 118) wrote that individuals are “infinite analytic propositions. But while they are infinite with respect to what they express, they are finite with respect

⁴ The title of Jacques Derrida’s obituary for Deleuze, a nearly total affinity, in this case too, must be seen as an open question as much as an affirmation.

their clear expression, with respect to their corporeal zone of expression.” In this dense formulation we find a precursor of Latour’s principle of irreduction according to which actors are indeed also “infinite propositions,” though at any given moment they do have a specifiable “zone of expression.” We also find a precursor to the ANT analytics of scale, with which one can either punctualize an actor *as* a definite entity or indefinitely trace the relations that compose it, either inwards or outwards. Moreover, just as Latour (1999b: 287) would write of the world’s composition of “many different practical ontologies” (which later hardened into modes of existence), Deleuze (1990a: 125) depicted the “frontier established” by the interactions of heterogeneous forces as a “metaphysical surface.”

The network as a pattern of interacting forces: the image is distinctly Nietzschean (Lee and Brown 1994, Jensen and Selinger 2003, Schmidgen 2015: 6). Deleuze and Latour, however, grapple with their Nietzschean legacies in markedly different ways. While Deleuze (1983: 68-73) was adamant that Nietzsche’s thought has nothing to do with the caricature that might make right, Latour, no doubt due to the recurrent critique of ANT for its interest in powerful actors, shrewd scientists and scheming politicians, is instead at pains to distance himself from Nietzsche. In *Pandora’s Hope* (1999b: 216-235), he argued that Socrates and his opponent, the proto-Nietzschean sophist Callicles, agreed on almost everything, and specifically on an elitist conception of politics, which Latour claimed to bypass (see Jensen and Selinger 2003: 202-9, cf. Deleuze 1983: 58-59).

Despite this bit of exorcism, Latour’s analyses of bodies and their powers nevertheless remain strikingly resonant with Deleuze’s Nietzsche and Spinoza. Thus, Deleuze’s (1990b) discussion of Spinoza revolves around bodily encounters just as Latour’s (2004) addresses how actors learn to be affected by others, and Latour’s notion of well-articulated facts (1999, 2000) is reminiscent of the evaluative principle of affirmative and reactive forces that Deleuze extracts from Nietzsche.

Only well articulated if they are kept alive to many concerns and firmly embedded in networks, facts exhibit not the relativity of truth but the truth of relation, just as Deleuze wrote. Furthermore, a principle of links and knots would become central Latour’s (2004) redefinition of matters of facts to matters of concern, a change that also has a Deleuzian flavor, since it resonates with the reorientation “from definition to interrogation,” that lies at the heart of his logic of sense, according to

which sense must be seen “as the problem to which propositions correspond” (1990a: 121). Thus, we can establish a series leading from a radical empirical openness to an exploratory/interrogative disposition, to the gradual forming of links and knots and eventually to well-articulated propositions and matters of concern. As we can never fully know what actors consist of, what power is, or how society is composed, the labor of re-describing relations and making propositions adequate to the metaphysical surfaces we inhabit continues indefinitely.

Obviously, then, there are significant overlaps and shared inclinations between Deleuze’s rhizomes and Latour’s networks. As long as our discussion remains situated on the terrain of similarity, however, the rhizome will remain unable to add something very *distinctive* to the network. Furthermore, comparison on the basis of similarity is contrary to the spirit of Deleuze and Latour for both of whom difference at once precedes and supersedes identity. It is thus time to consider divergence.

Divergence

If the affinity between rhizomes and networks is less than total where does divergence occur? For some, like the philosopher Graham Harman, this question has little sense, since he finds between the network and the rhizome not a series of potentially bridgeable gaps but a vast chasm. The “metaphysical surfaces” to which I previously alluded can be used as illustration, since Deleuze (1990a: 125) also wrote that they are an “effect of deep mixtures—a physics which endlessly assembles the variations and pulsations of the entire universe.” But, Harman insists, the idea of an underlying flow of becoming, or a set of pulsations, has no analogue in Latour. Moreover, contrary to Deleuzian objects, which are continuously changing, Harman (2009: 6) depicts Latourian entities as “so highly definite that they vanish instantly with the slightest change in their properties.” Thus, “no off-the-cuff remarks by Latour about his fondness for Deleuze can outweigh the utterly non-Bergsonian and non-Deleuzian foundations of Latour’s own metaphysics” (Harman 2016: 158). Case closed.

Or perhaps not. For while it is indeed difficult to find a Latourian version of a flow of becoming, ANT objects do not vanish and reappear as instantaneously as all that. Part of the issue is that Harman’s metaphysical focus tends to abstract from the objects and issues that Latour actually studies. Latour’s philosophical interest after all,

is an empirical one, and as he notes (1999b: 287), we are always faced with “many practical metaphysics, many different practical ontologies.”

If we turn to studies like *Aramis* (1996) or the pedofile of Boa Vista (1995) we do not in fact encounter trains and soil samples instantly fading in and out of existence, but rather objects that, much like Deleuze’s, are gradually modified as they enter into relational composites and begin to exchange properties with other entities. When Latour (1999b: 311) introduces the notion of “relative existence,” to make it “possible to define existence not as an all-or-nothing concept but as a gradient,” thereby allowing for “for much finer differentiations than the demarcation between existence and non-existence” we are obviously a far cry from an image of things disappearing with the slightest transformation (see also Jensen 2010: 19-31). To understand the points of divergence between the rhizome and the network, we are thus obliged to make finer discriminations. And no one offers better guidance for doing so than the philosopher of science and erstwhile student of Deleuze, Isabelle Stengers, one of Latour’s closest intellectual companions.

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour (1993) was constantly on the attack: the philosophy of science got it wrong, postmodernists got it wrong, social constructivists got it wrong. Once their epistemological errors had been fixed, the path to his hybrid parliament of things would open. But Stengers (2000: 124) is doubtful: the problems of contemporary science are hardly reducible to the “error of epistemologists.”⁵ Moreover, she goes on: “‘error’ does not have to be any more denounced than power. It explains nothing, except insofar as it is a product of the network, characteristic of the style of the network that belongs to our epoch, and of the political problem it poses.” As we know, however, has Latour spent nowhere near the same energy denouncing power as epistemology, and indeed that is why his work is so often interpreted as Nietzschean or Macchiavellian (e.g. Haraway 1997: 33-35; Schaffer 1991).

⁵ It is curious that Latour defines the problem in terms of error since this situates his analysis on the same terrain—of knowledge rather than networks—as the epistemologists whom he criticizes. Deleuze’s (1990a: 120) characterization of error in *The Logic of Sense* as “a very artificial notion, an abstract philosophical concept, because it affects only the truth of propositions which are supposed to be ready-made and isolated” is very apt here. On this point, too, Deleuze’s formulation resonates with Latour’s later movement from matters of fact to matters of concern.

In an early discussion, Nick Lee and Steve Brown (1994: 587) turned Deleuze against ANT to make just this point. Rather than rhizomatic, they concluded, the network had a tree-structure according to which: “All lines (routes, connections) are subordinated to the point, and all points are made to resonate with the center. This is the space of measurement and calculation - ordering space.” And if one follows the scientist-entrepreneur of *Science in Action*, it does indeed seem that actor-network theory is infatuated with striation, with tree logic, and thus with the state, and power. Accordingly, the network appears rather powerless against power’s seductions.

While Deleuze and Guattari whose advocacy of minor sciences and lines of flight are often seen to epitomize radical politics, it seems clear that, for Latour, “any revolutionary impulses recede firmly into the background” (Schmidgen 2015: 7).⁶ It is not coincidental that *The Invention of Modern Science* (Stengers 2000) was dedicated to Latour and Guattari “in memory of an encounter that never took place.”

Stengers accepts Latour’s (1999b: 106-108) depiction of science as characterized by the making of “links and knots” that generate scientific truths. Only she is quite circumspect about the *reach* of these truths. Since ANT is also known as the sociology of translation, it comes as no surprise that truths do not disseminate by themselves. But the objection is political as much as pragmatic. The fact that scientists manage to create particular facts within the rarefied settings of the laboratory confers upon them neither the capacity nor the right to determine the implications of those facts among a heterogeneous ecology of practices. While the making of a fact is an event, since it creates a distinction between a before and an after, the *extension* of the fact also depends on an event that involves and resituates non-scientists inhabiting other practices. For this reason the scientist is unable to dictate the scope of the event, and any attempt to extend ‘facts’ into other practices is therefore always accompanied by risk.

⁶ On one side, Latour constantly evokes the language of common sense. On the other, Deleuze is constantly on the attack against common sense and good sense (“partial truth associated with the feeling of the absolute” (Stengers 1997: 70)). While Latour likes to don the mantle of diplomat, Deleuze declared shameful Leibniz’ dictum to never aim to overthrow established sentiments (Stengers 2000: 15, also Jensen 2006).

If Stengers characterizes (2000: 64) the ‘parliament of things’ (Latour 1993) as a “difficult success,” it is thus not because it fails to conform to any standard critique of science. To be sure, the sciences become open to critique whenever they fail to respect the specificity and creativity of other practices, thus entering the mode of what Deleuze and Guattari called major, or state, science. Conversely, however, the creativity specific to the sciences, that which gives them the capacity to formulate their own problems and develop their own solutions, must also be acknowledged. And it is this creativity that threatens to be drowned out by the ANT affinity for power.

Stengers’ effort is thus to separate the parliament of things from its majoritarian tendencies in order to experimentally realign it with the adventure of Deleuze’s minor sciences.

Experimental Realignments

Nick Lee and Steve Brown (1994: 787) argued out that the network’s tendency to engulf and assimilate everything meant the loss of any space for “irreducible otherness.” And the statement that “literally, a network has no outside” (Latourian 1996: 49) seems to vindicate this interpretation. We might, however, pause at the word “literally.” Does the space of the other perhaps exceed the network in a *non-literal* manner? Perhaps, as Deleuze would say, *virtually*? This possibility is at least raised in *Reassembling the Social*, which introduces the notion of a fluid, formless plasma, which has not yet been brought into the collective (Latour 2005: 241ff).⁷

But then how does such “bringing into” occur? What ties together the rhizome and the network on this point is the famous principle of irreduction, according to which the “coming together of heterogeneous components...is...the first and last word of existence” (Stengers forthcoming). For scientists, the issue is how to invent the means to bring new entities into the collective, which also means protecting them against ever-vigilant skeptics standing ready to reduce them to fictions (think climate change). It concerns learning how to confer on nonhuman entities the capacity to confer back on the scientists the power to speak in their name (Stengers 1997: 164).

In accordance with the principle of irreduction, this process of *reciprocal conferral* has no fixed procedure and entails no particular form of relation. Even so, Latour’s career-long emphasis on tracing connection tempts a reductive imagination,

⁷ Tellingly, Graham Harman (2009: 132) skips very quickly over the relation between Latour’s sketch of plasma and Deleuze’s virtual.

always in search of material, or even better, directly observable, connections. In contrast, Deleuze (1994: 220) wrote that imagination “crosses domains, orders and levels, knocking down the partitions.” What held his interest, accordingly, was the continuous movement “from science to dreams and back again”: a movement between what is presently fiction yet may later become real, or between plasma and network, or between the virtual and the actual.

Looking to one side, a young face represents science in action. Looking in the other direction, a mature, bearded face symbolizes ready-made science. I am referring, obviously, to Latour’s (1987) famous adaptation of the Janus head. Unfortunately the usage of this evocative figure has also veered towards the ready-made. Almost all interest has focused on the maneuvers of scientist as they make facts, while almost all critique has centered on the bearded scientists toasting in celebration of their achievements.

The Janus head, however, depicts a “contrasted unity” (Stengers 2010: 42), and the exclusive focus on science in action loses sight of the fact that “the dreams of the youth, his ambitions, are bearded ones.” Science critics might well reply that this is precisely the problem: unsatisfied with a search for knowledge, scientists now yearn for power, prestige, and money. But, Stengers (2005: 154) argues, Deleuze and Guattari help

to resist understanding a description such as Bruno Latour’s as a denunciation: the bearded old man would just be lying since what he celebrates – the power of ‘matters of fact’ as purified from ‘states of affairs’ – would just be a socially stabilized state of affairs...[Deleuze and Guattari] certainly did not agree with the old bearded-face explanation, but they nevertheless asked us to relate science as creation with science’s ‘own specific means,’ which are associated, one way or the other, with the possibility of a scientist getting a beard

Thus it becomes possible to learn to celebrate with scientists their risky achievements. However this possibility has as its premise a refusal to endorse any achievement that relies on the conquest or denunciation of other practices. Working within their own creative registers, the sciences will have no need

to belittle the other ones in order to affirm [themselves]. Each of them is by definition a minority adventure, as Deleuze and Guattari positively characterize a minority as what does not dream to become a majority. And it is precisely because a minority collectively produces a divergence without a dream of convergence, of representing a future majority or consensus, that some transversal connections are possible (Stengers 2005: 158)

This notion of Deleuzian transversal connections—rhizomes—seems a far cry from the conventional view of the parliament of things as fundamentally pragmatic and reformist. Consider the illustration of Latourian politics given by Graham Harman (2014: 63), who states that although we may feel repulsed by Putin’s annexation of parts of Ukraine, our sense of outrage and moral superiority must be tempered by the practical realization that “certain chickens are left to the wolves because the collective itself cannot face the wolves, under penalty of disruption.” Had action been taken against Putin-the-wolf even more chickens might have perished.

To see how transversal connections take us in quite a different direction, we can consider Stengers’ (2000: 159) comments on the children’s story “The three little pigs.” No amount of critical irony, she observes, will obviate the distinction between the fictive protection of houses made of straw and twigs and the real protection offered by brick. So far, we remain firmly ensconced within material reality. Yet, before we accept this reality and entrust our lives to “experts discussing bricks and cement,” we need to ask what their solution “takes as acquired.” Brick, of course, is a solution to the problem of the wolf defined as a menace. Inasmuch as we were able to invent other relationships with the wolf, building stronger walls would cease being the only possible solution. It might even become irrelevant altogether. Given sufficient inventiveness, it is conceivable that no chickens (or pigs) would need to be sacrificed.

At this point, we have left behind the notions of material determination and political realism and entered the territory of Deleuzian “dreams.” Indeed, as Stengers (2000: 160) wryly notes, experts in “protection against destructive wolves,” will be quick to insist that such idealist proposals are risky if not impossible. But just as scientists are not free to extend the event associated with their laboratory facts into other practices, experts in cement and safety are also unqualified “to follow through all its consequences the logic of the story they are advocating.” After all, a refusal of,

or disinterest in, alternative political definitions and solutions might lead to “a story in which other wolves, even more threatening, will intervene, in which the bricks and cement will no longer suffice, in which we will be taken up in an endless move toward ever more costly and rigid modes of protection.”

This reading, then, opens the parliament of things to a Deleuzian movement between science, politics, and dreams of alternative futures. These would be futures in which we took the risk of gradually learning to confer on other entities (like menacing wolves) the capacity to confer back on our own collectives the ability to imagine their existence in ways other than as threats demanding repulsion or annihilation. Rather than reformist, the parliament of things would have become an institution of experimental metaphysics.

Rhizome

It is evidently just as pointless to call today for a renaming of ANT as it was for Latour to issue his original recall. But perhaps a new name is not required to allow the tangles of the rhizome to infiltrate and complicate the network. For one thing, the rhizome would impose the obligation on actor-network theorists, beneficial in my view, to become less literal-minded about the connections they trace. Unable to hide behind actors who they claim to simply follow, they would have to take more risks and be more explicit about why they take them.

What would be extended in this process would thus not be the network *but our curiosity* about the continuous composition and reconfiguration of the world. And we would not aim to capture through description all those ‘things’ and ‘others’ whose form does not fit the network—like the earth-beings beautifully described by Marisol de la Cadena (2015)—but rather take a humble interest in learning how to relate to such multifarious worlds.

And what about theory? Neither a social theory, nor an ontology, ANT remains an experimental effort to re-describe how the world is made by all its actors, including concept-actors like itself. A rhizome, for short. Alongside all the other entities that inhabit the tangles of the parliament of things it continues to work the metaphysical surface.

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