

New materialism

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Outline

- New materialism (NM): assumptions
- Actor-Network Theory (ANT)

New materialism: assumptions

- **Reaction to predominance of cultural and discursive approaches.**
- Trans-disciplinary enterprise.

- Materialism
- Empiricism
- Relational perspective

Materialism

- *“Truth and falsehood. Large and small. Agency and structure. Human and non-human. Before and after. Knowledge and power. Context and content. Materiality and sociality. Activity and passivity...all of these divides have been rubbished in work undertaken in the name of actor-network theory.”* (Law 1999: 3)
- NM rejects Cartesian dualism between social and natural world.
- Physical **things are central to our identities** which are practiced through objects we use.
- The world is a **socio-material construction**.



Empiricism

- **NM rejects abstract theory and the imposition of general categories upon the empirical data.**
- *“The task of the researcher is no to impose order, limit the range of acceptable entities or add reflexivity to [actors’] practice. But follow the actors, their wild innovations, methods, and accounts.” (Latour 2005: 11)*
- **NM uses rather an ethnographic research approach that allows to unfold the story in its complexity.**

Relational perspective

- The world is full of **hybrid entities** containing both human and non-human elements that **are mutually related**.

→ Social world is created by **entanglements** (Actor-Networks, assemblages) **of human and non-human actors**.



Human actors vs. non-human actants

- **Agency:** capacity of a thing or person **to impact its surroundings (no intentionality needed)**.
- Human actors and **non-human actants**.
- **Actants:** anything that “*...modify other actors through a series of...*” actions (Latour 1999: 75).
- If the entity modifies other entities, contributes something new to the entanglement that cannot be reduced to the other entities, then it is an actant.

Actor-Network Theory

- ANT mostly connected with a French philosopher and sociologist **Bruno Latour (1947 -)**.
- It is rather a **research methodology**.
- The central concept: **Actor-Network** that mediates interactions between people.
- **ANT focuses on how**, rather than why, are certain Actor-Networks formed, maintained, and destroyed.



Panopticon



Translation

- *“I use translation to mean displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies two elements of agents.” (Latour 1994: 32)*
- Translation focuses on **the manner in which entities’ interests and goals are represented, simplified, and transformed** into construction of an Actor-Network.
- Often, few actors become spokespersons for many of other by **defining and linking identities of others** in increasingly simplified and fixed ways (e.g. “we - as a nation - are threatened and need to be protected”).

Conclusions

- NM (ANT) allows **to accommodate and focus on non-social, non-cultural entities** that populate the world and integrate them with the social ones.
- It moves **away from abstract thinking and anthropocentrism.**
- The **entanglements are seen as provisional and historically contingent** (room for intervention).

First question for seminar

- Think about at least two mundane security-related objects that you encountered when you have been walking this morning from your home to this class.