

BOOK REVIEW

ANDERS BLOK, IGNACIO FARIAS and CELIA ROBERTS (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Actor-Network Theory*, 2019. London and New York: Routledge. ISBN 9781138084728

Twenty years since *Actor-Network Theory and After*, the editors of this new companion, Anders Blok, Ignacio Farias and Celia Roberts, are interested not in ‘current ANT-inspired research [but rather in] a collective exploration into what it takes and entails to think “near ANT”’ (p. xxii). Being ‘near ANT’ signifies that ANT has become both an intellectual pole with and against which to wrestle, and a white cane for empirical enquiry. To put it briefly: ANT is here to stay, so let us make the most use of it as a companion. For the authors, ANT is not understood as a set of fixed principles. Rather, in resonance with the initial intents of ANT, they want to destabilize its received meaning and recover its open-endedness. In doing so, they follow Annemarie Mol’s characterization of ANT as ‘a rich array of explorative and experimental ways of attuning to the world’ rather than a theory or fixed method. If ANT is this open-ended particular attunement, then what ‘this volume sets out to explore is what ANT entails as an intellectual practice or, perhaps, as a group of companionate intellectual practices’ (p. xiv).

The book is divided into six sections and thirty-nine essays. After a short but thorough introduction to the volume, the contributors tackle issues at the core of ANT: methodological agnosticism, the value of its concepts and infra-language, its relationship with anthropology, performativity and critique. A full section of seven essays deals with some ANT companions such as Donna Haraway, Gilles Deleuze and Isabelle Stengers, as well as semiotics and pragmatism. The next three sections discuss more contemporary issues of ANT, its prospects beyond science and technology, and the issues of location and scale. The closing section, which the editors call ‘inspiring, even exhilarating’, deals with the public and professional uses of ANT.

Although pleasing to read, the volume sometimes lacked pace and dynamism. Although many of the essays were enjoyable, I found some of them redundant, with similar points being made in the respective introductions to different articles. Such redundancies hinder the possibility to engage with potential future contributions of ANT. The volume has other limits that the authors readily acknowledge: some intellectual companions are missing, such as Michel Serres and Michel Foucault, and diversity is limited by the absence of African scholars or of Africa-related topics, despite all other continents being represented. Other limits might include

the dominating themes. Unsurprisingly, considering the editors' research themes, issues relating to the city and urban spaces, design, parliamentary politics, health and care, and the environment are central; yet I felt science and technology were missing. Hybrids have not stopped proliferating, and artificial intelligence, big data, space exploration, biotechnology and geoengineering promise to be important issues in the years to come, if they are not already. Overall, I recommend reading the general introduction and those written by the editors for each section before picking the chapters that spike one's interest. In fact, I will follow just that advice and point to some of the chapters that most interested me.

The first chapter of the volume, 'What if ANT wouldn't pursue agnosticism but care?', written by Daniel López-Gómez, touches on the agnostic position the inquirer is supposed to inhabit in ANT. For the author, studying a telecare service-provider, 'the downside [of ANT] was that the agnostic repertoire [...] seemed to make me quite insensitive towards the "violence" of the aforementioned frictions, to its uneven distribution and consequences for the actors at stake' (p. 7). The violence of translation and the 'poor' semiotic repertoire of ANT that is often identified as a strength of the approach can also desensitize. The author defends his position by arguing that inventing a care repertoire will allow not taking over 'agnosticism' but helping it by attuning the ethnographer to the qualities of the relations at play.

In their chapter 'What about race?', Amade M'charek and Irene van Oorschot note that ANT is presentist when viewed through the lens of traditional case studies. The authors propose that we look at history and different temporalities in order to unveil the broader dynamics. In treating of race, and more generally of power and domination, this chapter addresses one of the criticisms that is often used to reject ANT.

Carolin Gerlitz and Esther Weltevrede emphasize some issues regarding the application of ANT to an online world that is increasingly mediated by artificially intelligent non-human agents. 'Following the actor' becomes difficult, as algorithmic actants might not comply as easily to let human inquirers follow them. Non-humans did have agency, albeit not reflexive, but this is no longer the case. The authors push us to ask: what is ANT in a cognitively enhanced more-than-human world? Reworking some ANT dictum, they conclude that 'methodological alignment may require to work against some actors and biases, whilst allowing in others' (p. 355).

By describing his difficult time running a modern public hospital in Chile using ANT, Yuri Carvajal Bañados gifts us with a fantastic example of how ANT can productively be put to use from a position of power. Despite such issues, the author provides us with brilliant descriptions,

Book review

reflexivity and ANT maxims that we might want to take with us, such as: ‘ANT is an important un-ANThropogenic force’ and ‘ANT worked [...] as a valuable enzyme.’

Having read this interesting volume, I am convinced that ANT has a bright future and that anthropologists should keep engaging with it, as it is very much an ‘attunement to the world’ that emerged from ethnography. Following Kristin Asdal, ‘one lesson when it comes to ANT ought to be like the one ANT scholars used to apply on [agents they studied] alike: Do not listen to what the classic ANT scholars say about [the world]. Follow their practices and the methods they used in their laboratory studies and let these inspire [us]’ (p. 343).

I want to be ‘near ANT,’ making the book a success in my view.

Reviewed by QUENTIN LOUIS

MSc in Social Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Material Ethnography, University of Oxford. E-mail: quentin.louis@anthro.ox.ac.uk