

More than One, Less than Many: A Review of Three "Post-ANT" Books

by [Clay Spinuzzi](#)

Latour, Bruno. *War of the Worlds: What About Peace?* Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002.

Law, John. *Aircraft Stories: Decentering the Object in Technoscience*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.

Mol, Annemarie. *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.

1. Actor-network theory (or "ANT") is one of the more interesting developments to come out of that interdisciplinary knot that is variously termed "the rhetoric of science," "the sociology of science," and "science studies." Like distributed cognition, ANT is a symmetric approach to understanding experience: it dispenses with Cartesianism by using the same framework, concepts, and vocabularies for both humans and nonhumans. But unlike distributed cognition, ANT is concerned with the political and rhetorical. It speaks of humans and nonhumans alike as forming alliances, translating each other's interests, betraying each other. Its dictum, drawn from Machiavelli, is to follow the actors--and the texts, those very specific types of actors--wherever they lead. It's a fascinating approach, though misnamed. (Michael Lynch once pointed out that ANT should actually be named "actant-rhizome ontology," a term that Bruno Latour found accurate but horribly unaesthetic.) ANT became very popular for analyzing scientific and technological work--too popular, as it turns out, because the more people who wanted in on the game, the more they tried to stabilize and formalize this approach. So in 1999, some of ANT's guiding lights wrote in the collection *Actor-Network Theory and After* that ANT was, well, over.
2. Yet these people are still doing work, and that post-ANT work looks suspiciously similar to their pre-ANT work. Yes, they may have traded in network for rhizome (a reference to Deleuze and Guattari); yes, they may have begun talking about fluids circulating in a non-modern space, regimes of delegation, and modes of coordination as ways to account for stability in the ever-changing sites they describe; but a definite thread of continuity exists. Take, for instance, *War of the Worlds: What About Peace*. Latour published this little pamphlet in the wake of 9/11, although much of it is based on essays written before the tragedy. It's hopeful. He wants to see this tragedy as a wake-up call, as a way for us to recognize that we are at war--a war that, he contends, has been waged for a while but that the West has not acknowledged. Once we recognize this war, he says, we can possibly negotiate a peace.
3. Those who have read Latour's previous work, particularly *Pandora's Hope*, will recognize the theme of open negotiation underlying this piece. In *Pandora's Hope* Latour charges that modernists and postmodernists alike have refused to allow us to negotiate the terms of our existence (one appeals to absolute authority while the other is too busy deconstructing all authority), and here he links the two to ethnocentrism and multiculturalism respectively. They're two sides of the same coin: both rely on the notion that there is one nature but many cultures. That's a notion that the West has embraced, he says, and ultimately both Western ethnocentrism and Western multiculturalism assume that the one Nature is best apprehended by Western ways of knowing. We might appreciate that another culture believes differently about its gods, creation myths, you name it--but deep down we believe that our methods have allowed us to see Nature more clearly than they. That, Latour says, is not only corrosive but, from an ontological viewpoint, inaccurate. Instead, he says, we should recognize that ways of knowing are negotiable by all sides and that there is no absolute authority--neither God, nor Nature, nor Science--that we can call in to settle the dispute.
4. Then we get into the problem of the book. Latour is very attached to democracy and democratic dialogue, as am I, and he wants to use democratic dialogue to negotiate a truce in this once-hidden, now revealed war of cultures. Great. Here's a passage discussing the shape these negotiations might take:

Take the case of religion, which, even more than Science, has to do with earlier, premature modernist projects to unify the planet. Can a positive constructionism be applied in this instance? Might not the nearly fanatical attachment to the non-constructed character of the unity of God be largely a response to the unifying role of nature, which the negotiations have agreed to limit? If the latter becomes negotiable, why not the former too? Do we mandate the diplomats to dare to say, for instance, of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that he is well or badly constructed? Why not use [the discourse of fabrication] positively, and reformulate, in the company of the others, the question of the right ways of constructing good divinities? Would we not have here, instead of a hypothetical 'inter-religious dialogue,' a more fruitful and even technical exchange of procedures? The all powerful already existing absolute God sends his devout to holy war, but what about the relative God which might be unified in the slowly constructed future? (45-46)

The quote is shocking, as I'm sure Latour meant it to be, but it also strikes me as naive. Whether there is a war of the worlds or not, those who created the event that frames this booklet were in important ways quite modernist: well-educated in Western schools and ideologies, literate in Western languages (more so than most US citizens), schooled in the sciences and technologies. And their ideology--this is the important part--was also quite Western, owing as much to fascist ideologies of the last century as they do to Islam. They arguably bought into modernism as much as the Western world did. (To recall ANT's mandate: Follow the actors! Follow the texts!) And the notion of renegotiating God with hostile parties would not set well with them or even with non-modern non-Westerners. You'll find quite a few Western diplomats willing to negotiate in Latour's terms, but with whom will they negotiate?

5. While Latour talks about how we represent each other and how we negotiate those representations, John Law is interested in how we represent objects. In his book *Aircraft Stories: Decentering the Object in Technoscience*, he takes up a study that he had written about some years previously, then abandoned. This story, about a fighter plane that was developed and ultimately abandoned, is told in slices. Law says that this approach was suggested to him by Latour; if so, I don't think it was good advice because, unlike the representations of the airplane, the book ultimately doesn't cohere.
6. Partly that's due to the affect that permeates the book. Take this passage: "Absence/presence, the absence of materiality that is also a presence--no doubt that is what those who write actor-network studies intend when they talk of 'translation' and 'chains of translation'" (98). "No doubt" indeed. Actor-network theory is most strongly associated with a very few names, including Michel Callon, Bruno Latour ... and John Law. So why the artful hesitance and distancing between the author and ANT? Particularly when the author has written so authoritatively in the past about what ANT is and espouses?
7. I suppose the author could say that he has begun to distance himself from ANT, at least as it has emerged lately as a strong program. Certainly this book reflects a shift away from ANT, and particularly some of its more attractive aspects: the focus on materiality, the pragmatism. But in other places the author is quite happy to draw from ANT and particularly his previous work in it. This feigned (that's how I read it) distancing is characteristic of the book, which has attempted to take on a postmodern aesthetic--stops and starts, hesitations, the performance of reflexivity. It's tiresome because the author clearly has strong ideas about his subject. The performance, in other words, is poor. Let's not kid ourselves, academic writing is performed, and what I admire so much about Latour's style is that he can perform an outburst so admirably while clearly making a well thought out argument. Law's writing style, in comparison, is overprocessed and overproduced in the same way that an N*Sync album is.
8. Not that there aren't some worthwhile things in here. Law starts with a reflection on the role of personal writing and performance that is quite interesting. His use of Deleuze and Guattari begins to make sense through the

case. And the approach of examining an empirical study through slices--although flubbed here in my opinion, making the book incoherent rather than "fractionally coherent"--has some promise.

9. But then on the other hand, Law's project is doomed from the start. His project "is about modernism and its child, postmodernism--and about how we might think past the limits that these set to our ways of thinking" (1). But rather than abandon the distinction between the two as an artifact of Cartesianism (Latour's approach), Law proposes that we oscillate between modernism and postmodernism. So we enter a bipolar world in which we are supposed to enjoy and explore tensions between mo and pomo, presence and absence, ideal and material, grand narratives and little narratives, and other dichotomies. He uses these oscillations to explore the "fractionally coherent" object of the airplane, demonstrating that different parties represent, treat, and enact the airplane differently. In the terms of ANT, the airplane never stops being translated: it is at once many different things to different people and groups, it symbolizes different things, and it meets different objectives. Pragmatically speaking, we are talking about a multiplicity of aircraft that all parties treat as one. The object doesn't have a unitary existence, even though people treat it that way; it is more than one, less than many. If only Law had been able to express the concept that simply and make his argument that straightforwardly.
10. Law has tackled these themes more successfully in other venues, particularly in his collaborations with Annemarie Mol. Mol has written her own book on representations, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*, and it accomplishes what *Aircraft Stories* doesn't: it makes a strong case for the notion of multiplicity. Mol nails down this nebulous concept with concrete examples from an ethnography she conducted at a hospital, in which she asked the question: What is atherosclerosis? The best answer--and the emblematic scene of the book, the key linkage--comes from one of her informants. He shows her a slide under the microscope and demonstrates how the veins have calcified and narrowed, restricting blood flow and causing great pain in the legs of the person who had the disease. This calcification, he tells her, is atherosclerosis. And after a pause, he qualifies: under the microscope.
11. It's an important qualification. The pathologist can only make these slides after the leg has been amputated (since the veins are otherwise occupied until that point, you see), so his version of atherosclerosis comes rather late in the game. Other people's versions of atherosclerosis are enacted differently (and Mol selects the term "enacted" carefully, to indicate the complex practices in which they are embedded). To the patient, atherosclerosis is great pain in the legs; to the general practitioner, one possible explanation for that pain and for the weak pulse in the legs; to the radiologist, a cloudy smear in the X-rays after a radioactive dye has been injected; to a surgeon, "pipes" that have to be cleaned; to an occupational therapist, a malady that can be abated with exercise. Mol points out that usually these multiple enactments of the disease cohere--that is, there's enough correspondence among them that people can be said to be talking about the same object, the same disease. But, interestingly, sometimes these enactments don't cohere. Mol spends much time trying to figure out when that happens and why.
12. The book is in general engagingly written (although, like Law, Mol can sometimes be too stylistically self-indulgent), thought-provoking, and tremendously interesting. It makes John Law's point in *Aircraft Stories* far better than he did: Mol persuasively argues that the things we take as settled, scientifically quantifiable and observable phenomena are not really just objects-in-the-world; rather, they are always multiple. Reality itself, she says, multiplies when we focus on artifacts or practices.
13. As a whole, these three books represent (if I can use that word without irony) the different ways that post-ANT thought has developed. Despite their differences, the three books focus on how different people, materials, and practices meet to somehow cobble together shared worlds, worlds that are always under negotiation and always dynamic, yet somehow manage to cohere.

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