

Materialising the Subject: phenomenological and post-ANT objects in the social sciences

Date : December 29, 2008

This conference entitled [Materialising the Subject: phenomenological and post-ANT objects in the social sciences](#) provides the opportunity for inter-disciplinary and trans-Atlantic debate about some of the most recent theoretical and methodological moves in sociology, anthropology, geography and philosophy. When considered together these moves reveal multiple approaches to a common theoretical concern - the dissolution of the subject/object distinction - the corollary of which, across the social sciences, is the "turn to ontology" and the consequent effort to radically rework our understanding of what it is (for humans and non-humans) to constitute a world.

Moving beyond the actor-network as an analytical category, which usefully contests the assumption that humans and non-humans are separate entities and that reality is, therefore, objectively given and revealed by science; post-actor-network theory challenges the tendency to reify the form of the network/object as a stable relational configuration (Latour B. 2005; Law J. and Hassard J. 1999). The move now is to explain the emergence and experience of "things", such as diseases, as the fluid outcome of various, often contested, sets of material practices (Mol A. 2003). These practices are understood to be highly specific, spatially distributed assemblages or enactments (Law J. and Mol A. 2001) that gain their stability from perpetual performance. The analytical category, here, becomes "material practice" with distinct methodological implications and the notion of form shifts away from singularity and towards a multiple configuration of more fragile relational elements. In a parallel "relational" move in social anthropology, one which unsettles the Euro-American concept of the subject as individual, the material practice of exchange takes centre stage in a theory that explains how certain kinds of objects, like gifts, come to substantiate the specific form of sociality through which personhood is distributed (Strathern M. 1988; 1991). Such an analysis makes possible comparisons and contrasts between different relational forms and notions of the person that objects come to substantiate among various human collectives (Viveiros de Castro 1998b; 2004). This includes a consideration of the effects of new forms of property arising from innovations in the production of socio-technical, subject/object hybrids such as genetically engineered human cells (Strathern M. 1996; J. Edwards 2005).

Having always done what sociologists of science and technology were just beginning to do in the West, anthropologists were praised by actor-network theorists (B. Latour 1993) for attending, in other parts of the world, to the subject/object hybrids that were constitutive of radically different understandings of human and non-human groupings, relations and capacities. Wishing to bring into existence an "anthropology of the modern world", one which treats the subject/object distinction as the foundational myth of modernity and which undermines, therefore, the objective premises of the asymmetry between "the West and the rest", Bruno Latour makes possible new terms of theoretical engagement for an anthropology which is increasingly "at home". At the same time, however, the link is clear and productive with a post-colonial anthropology coming to terms with the paradox engendered by modernity's loss of confidence and the modernising drive of post-colonial nation

states.

Arguably, however, the "turn to ontology" relies, for its novelty, on a conceptualisation of epistemology that makes knowledge the outcome of processes of conscious abstraction, theorisation, formalisation, institutionalisation, representation and interpretation. This risks a reproduction of the dichotomies between "knowing" and "doing" and between "mind" and "body" that have already been challenged in phenomenological theories of embodiment and in models of situated learning in cognitive psychology. Indeed, despite the accusation, at the heart of actor network theory (Latour B. 1993; 1999c; 2005), that phenomenology is inadequate to the task of assembling a radical theory of object-centred-sociality, those of a phenomenological persuasion might argue that the insights of actor-network theory are not new to them (Ihde D. 2003); that the notions of 'intentionality, inter-subjectivity and life-world not only pre-empt the conclusions of the actor network theorists but do so in a way that makes the distinction between ontology and epistemology as untenable as the one between subjects and objects or "the social" and "the world". Railing against the abstract concepts of the philosophers and seeking a new charter for method in the social sciences, sociologists (Law 2004), anthropologists (Henare A, Holbraad M & Wastell S. 2006) and geographers (Thrift 2007) find, in the ethnographic method what looks like common ground a material practice that is a philosophical one too. Clearly, there are lessons to be learned from conversations, across disciplines, about similar objects of analysis and how these objects are constituted and stabilised as "things", with all kinds of historically specific effects.

The objective of the conference is to provide an advanced forum for five in-conversation style debates between world renowned scholars and to make these live conversations accessible a) to a scholarly audience of 50 in the place where the conversations will happen in February 2009 - at the Manchester Museum b) to a wider public via an interactive website on which audio files of the conversations will be posted and c) to a wider scholarly audience via publication of the position papers and transcribed conversations.

Inspired by specific scholarly contributions to existing debate, the five conversations will encompass the following questions/themes for on-going discourse:

After Networks: spatio-temporal analytics.

Does it make any Sense to Say that Objects Have Agency?

Is Phenomenology Really an Albatross?

Skilled Practice: cognition as human-artefact-human orientation system.

Not Networks Per Se, but Distributed Enactments

Click below for the programme

Programme:

Materialising the Subject: phenomenological and post-ANT objects in the social sciences An International Conference

Venue: Manchester Museum, Oxford Road

Date: 26-27 February 2009

Conference Programme

Day One - Thursday 26th February 2009

12.00 - 1.00 - registrations and lunch

1.00 - 3.15 - Welcome, introduction and session one:

After Networks: spatio-temporal analytics

In conversation:

Assistant Professor Robert Oppenheim (USA), Dept. of Asian Studies, University of Texas at Austin

(<https://www.utexas.edu/research/eureka/faculty/view.php?pid=1729>)

Dr Matt Candei, Sigrid Rausing Lecturer in Collaborative Anthropology, Dept. of Social Anthropology (University of Cambridge) (<http://www.candea.net/>)

Professor Harvey Molotch (USA), Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis, New York University. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvey_Molotch)

3.15 - 3.45 - tea/coffee

3.45 - 5.30 - session two:

Does it make any Sense to Say that Objects Have Agency?

In conversation:

Dr Martin Holbraad, Lecturer, Dept. of Anthropology (Social Anthropology), University College London. (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/staff/m_holbraad)

Dr Monika Buscher, Senior Lecturer, Centre for Science Studies, Lancaster University. (<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/sociology/profiles/Monika-Buscher/>)

Professor Susanne Kuechler, Dept. of Anthropology (Material Culture) University College London. (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/staff/s_kuechler/index)

Dr Soumya Venkatesan, Lecturer, Dept. of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester. (<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/disciplines/socialanthropology/about/staff/venkatesan/>)

7.30 - Conference Dinner - Venue TBC

Day Two - Friday 27th February 2009

9.00 - 10.45 - session three:

Is phenomenology really an albatross?

In Conversation:

Professor Don Ihde (USA) Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Ihde)

Professor Michael Jackson (USA) Distinguished Visiting Professor of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Jackson_\(anthropology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Jackson_(anthropology)))

Professor Nigel Thrift, Vice Chancellor, (University of Warwick)(www.nigelthrift.org)

10.45 - 11.15 - tea/coffee

11.15 - 1.00 - session four:

Skilled Practice: cognition as human-artefact-human orientation system

In conversation:

Professor Christina Toren, Professor of Social Anthropology, University of St Andrews (<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/anthropology/dept/staff/?staffid=150>)

Professor Tim Ingold, Chair in Social Anthropology, University of Aberdeen (<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone/staff/details.php?id=tim.ingold>)

Associate Professor Morten Pedersen, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen (<http://antropologi.ku.dk/english/staff/beskrivelse/?id=255694>)

Material World

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1.00 - 2.00 - lunch

2.00 - 3.45 - session five:

Not Networks Per Se, but Distributed Enactments

In conversation:

Professor John Law (Centre for Science Studies, University of Lancaster)

(<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/sociology/profiles/John-Law/>)

Professor Penny Harvey, Professor of Social Anthropology (University of Manchester)(

<http://virtualsociety.sbs.ox.ac.uk/people/harvey.htm>)

Dr Albena Yaneva, Lecturer in the School of Architecture, University of Manchester

(http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/architecture/staff/yaneva_albena.htm)

3.45 - 4.15 tea/coffee and End