Actor-Network Theory, organizations and critique: towards a politics of organizing

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Abstract
In recent years the approach to social theory known as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has been adopted within a range of social science fields. Despite its popularity, ANT is considered a controversial approach in that it appears to promote a sociological perspective that lacks substantive political critique. This is argued to be particularly true in ANT's 'translations' in management and organization studies (MOS). In this article, we argue that the 'ANT and After' literature offers the potential to develop such a political critique. In particular we suggest it presents the opportunity to develop an approach that de-naturalizes organization(s), has the ability to deliver critical performativity, and at the same time offer a reflexive approach to management and organizational knowledge. Using organizational examples, we argue that ANT and After can offer insights relevant to the development of a critical perspective on MOS, notably through its advocacy of a 'political ontology' of organizing.

Originating in studies of science, technology and society (STS), actor-network theory (ANT)—or the 'sociology of translation' (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1999b)—is an increasingly popular sociological method used within a range of social science fields. ANT gains much of its notoriety through advocating a socio-philosophical approach in which human and material factors are brought together in the same analytical view. In attempting to comprehend complex situations, ANT rejects

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any sundering of human and non-human, social and technical elements. In a much cited article, Michel Callon (1986) warns, for example, of the dangers of 'changing register' when we move from concerns with the social to those of the technical. The methodological philosophy is that all ingredients of socio-technical analysis be explained by common practices.

When we seek to translate an ANT approach into the sphere of Management and Organization Studies (MOS), we are involved in the analysis of alliances or networks that 'initiate and maintain the superordination of individuals or groups over others' (Grint, 1991: 149). We are thus reminded that many actors are locked into networks of which certain elements reside outside of the focal organization. In addition, managerial networks are seen to take recourse, not just to the network of peer managers and control over material resources within the organization, but also, for example, to the resources of the legal system and domestic sources of support, which are 'invisibly meshed into the organization's disciplinary mechanisms' (Grint, 1991: 149). As Latour (1987) demonstrated similarly in the field of STS, scientists physically isolated from the rest of the world in their search for knowledge are actually highly dependent upon a large array of supportive networks outside the laboratory.

The conceptual tools underlying the ANT approach enable us, therefore, to study the assembling and stabilizing of diverse human and non-human entities within diffuse socio-material systems (Law, 1999a). For MOS the use of these tools has been part of a movement away from a functional emphasis on organization as a discrete structural entity and towards the study of processes and practices of organizing, and importantly socio-technical organizing (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1999; Calás and Smirich, 1999; Hull, 1999; Lee and Hassard, 1999). ANT has been used by writers to examine a wide range of research issues within MOS, but notably with regard to studies of information systems and information technology (see Bloomfield and Best, 1992; Bloomfield and Vudubakis, 1994, 1999; Hine, 1995; Vidgen and McMaster, 1996).

Although ANT has been readily deployed in a number of sociological spheres, it has been subject to severe criticism. Walsham (1997), for example, argues that there are four main criticisms regularly directed at ANT: namely that it offers a limited analysis of social structures; neglects issues of political bias and morality; fails to conceptualize adequately the distinction between humans and nonhumans and has problems in examining how to follow entities in the network analysis. In addition, McLean and Hassard (2004) argue that ANT accounts have invited a range of controversies in respect to the inclusion/exclusion of actors and networks; role of social/technical privileging and status; distinction between agency and structure; and nature and role of heterogeneous engineering.

Despite the argument of the so-called 'post-modern turn' in MOS—that ANT has considerable analytical potential for the field (see e.g. Calás and Smirich, 1999)—concerns such as the above suggest the approach is problematic in terms of the insights it holds for the development of a *critical* analysis of management and organizations. For critical organization studies, Reed (1997) suggests that ANT is analytically under-powered in comparison to 'traditional' sociological perspectives based on 'duality and dualisms'. Similarly Whittle and Spicer (2008:14) have urged scholars from the Critical Management Studies (CMS) movement to 'resist translation by Actor Network Theory', in an argument that suggests the positioning of ANT and CMS as analytical opponents. Drawing on the 'further development' (Law, 1999a) of ANT under what has become known as the 'ANT and After' literature (see Law and Hassard, 1999; Latour 2003, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b; Law, 2007), as well as some of the principal characteristics of CMS (see Alvesson et al., 2009; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Grey, 2007; Grey and Willmott, 2002), our article assesses if ANT is really incapable of offering ideas and insights that may help to develop a critical perspective on management and organizations. An important caveat to our task is that rather than a singular and clear cut approach, ANT is instead, as Mol (1999) suggests, a 'multiple' one, with many usages and interpretations

(see also Brown and Capdevilla, 1999; Woolgar et al., 2009). As '(r)ealities have become multiple. Not plural: multiple' (Mol, 1999: 74) ANT is performed differently in the research accounts in which it has been deployed (Mol, 2009). After discussing what is critical in MOS, we will characterize the ANT approach that *we* espouse in order to later access ANT's (in)ability to provide a critical perspective for MOS. Drawing upon insights from the ANT and After literature—and in particular its handling of 'ontological politics'—we suggest ultimately that ANT can indeed be of value for developing a critical perspective on organization(s).

What is 'critical' in management and organizational studies?

Although elements of critical thought have been present in the social sciences since the work of anarchists (e.g. Mikhail Bakunin), utopian socialists (e.g. Henry de Saint-Simon) and communists (e.g. Karl Marx), it is in the past 40 years that 'critical' analysis in MOS has developed as a discernible institutionalized research movement (Adler et al., 2007). While the origins of such critical work lie mainly in Marxist approaches (e.g. Bendix, 1956; Braverman, 1974), subsequent critical thinking in MOS has incorporated postmodernist thought (e.g. Calás and Smircich, 1999; Hassard and Parker, 1993; Hassard et al., 2008). In this context, CMS has emerged as a movement that attempts to encompass a range of (critical) epistemological traditions—ranging from critical theory (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992) to postcolonialist studies of management (Prasad, 2003)—in the various academic specialities of the field (for overviews of CMS see Adler et al., 2007; Alvesson et al., 2009; Grey and Willmott, 2005). It can be argued that, nowadays, CMS incorporates a large percentage of critical work in MOS.[1]

As CMS perspectives often reflect qualitatively different epistemological and ontological assumptions it is no surprise that, in Adler's (2002: 388) words, 'too few of us [in CMS] would ever be able to agree on anything much'[2] (Adler, 2002: 388). Given such diversity in CMS offerings, a common concern has been to discuss and define what actually counts as this type of academic work (e.g. Adler et al., 2007; Alvesson et al., 2009; Fournier and Grey, 2000). Parker (2002) proposes that when academics claim to be conducting 'critical' work in MOS they tend to display a broadly left-wing/liberal political identity coupled with a suspicion of positivist methodology. Fundamentally, CMS does not find mainstream management to be 'intellectually coherent and/or ethically defensible' (Willmott, 1995: 36). As such, it seeks to challenge the authority and relevance of mainstream management thinking and practice insofar as it tends to mean 'knowledge *of* management becomes knowledge *for* management and alternative voices are silenced or marginalized' (Alvesson et al., 2009: 6, emphasis in original). Some of the goals of CMS, therefore, are to: challenge the oppressive character of management and organization (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Adler, 2002), maintain a critical stance towards instrumental reason (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996), oppose dominant power, ideology, managerial privilege and hierarchy (Adler et al., 2007) and analyse relations between power and knowledge (McKinlay and Starkey, 1998), especially to show how forms of knowledge that appear to be neutral can serve to reinforce asymmetrical relations of power. In this sense CMS implies opposition to oppressive management and organizational practices, while seeking to inspire and promote (social) reform in the interests of the under- or un-privileged, as well as emancipation from and/or resistance to ideologies, institutions, and identities that tend to fix individuals into unreflectively reproduced ideas, intentions, and practices (Alvesson, 2008).

One of the most influential attempts to define the boundaries that make a work 'critical' in MOS was produced by Fournier and Grey (2000) (see also Grey and Willmott, 2005). They advocate that CMS organizes itself around three core elements—'*de-naturalization*', '*reflexivity*' and '*(non)performative intent*'. De-naturalization refers to 'uncovering the alternatives that have been effaced by

management knowledge and practice (...) CMS is concerned with the proposition that things may not be as they appear' (Fournier and Grey, 2000:18). As such, de-naturalization means not assuming that management, its various characteristics and organizational realities are the given order of things, which consequently implies that things could be 'different'. Reflexivity relates to the fact that CMS involves intense reflexions about its epistemological, ontological and methodological stances. In so doing, it challenges the taken-for-granted objectivism and scientism usually present in mainstream positivist management research (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 19). And the (non)performative element basically refers to the avoidance of knowledge creation that is driven by instrumental efficacy and the efficiency-exclusive concerns that are commonplace in the realms of management and organizations (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 17).

The Fournier and Grey (2000) discussion, however, has been taken as a strong indication that CMS has become obsessed with epistemological and ontological dilemmas with the consequence of ignoring the politics of the workplace (see Thompson, 2004). Thompson and O'Doherty (2009), for example, argue that undue reflexivity about labour processes and relativism in terms of organizational knowledge are not appropriate ways of challenging managerialism in theory or practice. In addition, Thompson (2004) argues that CMS tends to emphasize a form of meta-theorizing whose focus on denaturalization and deconstruction problematizes everything and resolves nothing, thus making explicit a lack of critical engagement with 'reality'. And similarly, CMS has been criticized for moving away from engaging with organizational practices and participants (Spicer et al., 2009); or more precisely, that the (non)performative stance is understood as though CMS were advocating anti-performativity altogether (Spicer et al., 2009).[3]

In this context, the notion of 'critical performativity' (CP) has emerged as a potential solution to the problems of the supposed anti-performative character of CMS,[4] at the same time that 'critique' in MOS has become more concerned with practice (see Messner et al., 2008; Spicer and Bohm, 2007). A first step in the promotion of CP has indeed been to broaden the notion of performativity itself. Fournier and Grey (2000: 17) for example adopt a technical meaning (Alvesson et al., 2009) for the term (i.e. 'to subordinate knowledge and truth to the production of efficiency'), although generally the CP notion takes performativity as signifying more straightforwardly 'intervention in practice' (Spicer et al., 2009: 543). Above all CP 'involves active and subversive intervention into management discourses and practices' (Spicer et al., 2009: 538). The aim is to move CMS beyond 'cynicism and negativity' by recognizing that critique also involves an affirmative movement (Spicer et al., 2009). For Alvesson et al. (2009: 23) CP is underscored by an understanding that critique can incorporate positive impulses alongside its reflexive and deconstructive course, in order to avoid becoming only a negative force and, as such, marginalized within the academic world.

ANT and After: bringing politics back in

Having explored some key characteristics of contemporary CMS, we now discuss notions associated with the ANT version *we* espouse in order to explore subsequently whether our favoured approach can contribute towards a 'critical' analysis of organization(s).

ANT suggests that things take form and acquire attributes as a consequence of their relations with others (Law, 1994, 1999a, 1999b). Law (2002) argues that whilst entities in their broadest sense are usually conceived of as having stability and uniqueness, in contrast ANT advocates that they are a result achieved when different heterogeneous elements are continually assembled together (see also Callon, 1986; Law, 1999a). As ANT regards entities as produced in relations and applies this ruthlessly to materials, it can be understood as a 'semiotics of materiality' (Law, 1999a: 3).[5] In this way, a central feature of ANT is to attempt to explain how 'ordering

effects'—from devices (e.g. Law, 1988) to organizations (e.g. Law, 1994)—are performed into being. Although the 'T' of the ANT acronym stands for 'Theory', it is thus better understood as a methodological approach (see Latour, 2005c, Law, 2004, 2007). In this way, ANT can be seen as an approach to the field that offers analytical tools that can be applied to narrative knowledge, be they organizational or otherwise (cf. Czarniawska, 2009: 156).

Although early ANT work developed with the aim of exploring explicit or implicit dynamics of power (e.g. Callon and Latour, 1981; Callon and Law, 1982; Latour, 1987; Law, 1986;—see also Clegg, 1989; Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005), the approach has frequently been accused of being politically 'neutral' (see Amsterdamska, 1999; Ausch, 2000; Haraway, 1992; Star, 1991). To clarify this matter, it can be argued that while ANT is all about power, in contrast to CMS it inverts the order of scrutiny: for ANT, power is an explanandum, not the explanans, a position that is developed in literature on ANT and After (see below). In addressing power, ANT has been accused of possessing a narrative that includes only the manager, entrepreneur or scientist's point of view, this leading ultimately to the charge of managerial bias (see Star and Griesemer, 1989: 390). ANT's critics also claim it is inappropriate for developing a 'critical' analysis of organization(s) (see Reed, 1997; Whittle and Spicer, 2008), mainly because ANT is considered incapable of delivering a reflexive, non-performative and de-naturalized approach to MOS (see Whittle and Spicer, 2008). Consequently, it appears incapable of informing critical performativity in MOS.

This supposed lack of political engagement has, however, been addressed by some of ANT's main proponents. Law (1991) has suggested that accepting 'epistemological relativism' does not imply political ignorance, anonymity or neutrality. He suggests that the consequences of ordering effects must be understood in terms of inclusions and exclusions that are created as well as their effects. Thus for Law (1997b) politics is about appreciating hierarchical distributions, but also about understanding how such orderings can create specific inclusions and exclusions which are performed in 'heterogeneous' ways. Taking colonialism as an example, Law (1997b) argues that this is not a 'single system' and that such forms of domination are always performed multifariously and through different sets of political relations. Elsewhere, Law (1999a) suggests, additionally, that 'asymmetries' can be created inside the network building process, arguing that the possibility of exerting control reflects the central location one entity might hold in a materially heterogeneous network, this serving to facilitate the processing of information from the periphery to the centre, thus enabling political 'action' (see also Latour, 1987; Law 1986, 1999b).

Despite the initiatives mentioned above, perhaps the place where attempts to establish a clear ANT position on politics and political forces is most robustly made is in the literature popularly known as 'ANT and After'.[6] This literature tackles the question of ANT's tendency to analyse ordering simplistically, with the consequence of potentially 'naturalizing' orderings and following a 'managerial' stance (see Law and Hassard, 1999). As a way of dealing with ANT's 'problems' (Law and Hassard, 1999), works in ANT and After have attempted to emphasize even more of a relational stance. This is achieved by challenging, more explicitly, traditional forms of representation. Latour (1999c), for example, argues that representation is usually thought to be established by using words to express the 'real'. This, however, assumes reality as being 'out there' and entities as essences that exist discretely in the order of things. Contrary to how representation tends to be addressed, Latour (1999c) states that things are always 'assembled' into being, rather than existing 'out there', independently, or being the product of exclusively human interpretation. Latour (2002, 2005c) thus wishes to reframe the idea of construction in social science as material 'assembling' and 'reassembling'. To argue that a fact is constructed is usually to say that it is not real (i.e. socially constructed), whilst in other sciences and also in common-sense to stress that something has been constructed is to argue that it has a modest yet visible origin. One of the advantages of following the construction

process as 'assembling' is that it is possible to investigate how connections between heterogeneous elements become established, how associations are made and unmade, how different elements inter-associate with each other, and how assemblages and facts emerge as outcomes of such processes.[7] Thinking about construction in terms of common sense 'assembling' allows us to consider that things could fail or be otherwise (Latour, 2005c).

For Mol (2002) similarly, entities are enacted[8] and performed into being through materially heterogeneous practices. By foregrounding 'practices', this notion helps us to go beyond traditional forms of representation, reinforcing the claim that nothing exists autonomously without relations that sustain entities, which is a clear stance against naturalizing ordering or viewing it in a simplistic way. Furthermore, ANT and After argues that realities are enacted in the processes of knowing (see Law, 2004; Law and Singleton, 2005; Law and Urry, 2004). For Law (2007: 15) different narratives 'enact' realities rather than simply 'describe' them, and thus are a 'version of the better and the worse, the right and the wrong, the appealing and the unappealing'. As Law (2007: 15) continues 'There is no innocence. The good is being done as well as the epistemological and the ontological'. For ANT and After, accounts are therefore not only political (Law, 2004, 2007; Law and Urry, 2004), they are also *ontologically* political (Law, 2004; Law and Urry, 2004; Mol, 1999, 2002). One result of thinking in ontologically political terms is that 'every time we make reality claims in science we are helping to make some social reality more or less real' (Law and Urry, 2004: 396).

Combining ontology with politics thus suggests that 'the condition of possibilities are not given' (Mol, 1999: 74), but are in the making. Realities are not immutable—they are shaped, enacted and contested. Ontological politics is connected with the way in which the real is implicated in the political and vice versa, meaning that things could always be otherwise (Law, 2008; Mol, 1999). The concept of ontological politics is based therefore on the notion that things might be 'different'. By questioning traditional forms of representation, ANT and After has thus challenged conventional politics. A key assumption of political representation is the need to be 'faithful' (Latour, 2005b) and thus to consider entities and events as absolute truths or untruths (Latour, 2003, 2004a, 2004c, 2005b). Political decisions are assumed to be taken on the basis of 'facts' presented as unambiguous. However, as ANT does not assume entities to be discrete, singular and unproblematic, then traditional notions of politics 'can only fail' (Latour, 2004b). When exploring problematic political issues through this approach, Latour (2005a) has used the term 'Thing' to refer etymologically to matters at the heart of an assembly in which discussion requires judgement to be reached in common, and through the designation of an 'archaic agora'. Hence, within ANT and After, politics is about Things; it is about controversies surrounding existence and the denial of singularity and championing of multiplicity.

Politics is not limited therefore to how it has usually been understood—it is not exclusively about 'giving voice' by or in itself (Latour, 2005a, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c), but can also be based, for instance, on how laboratory assemblies enact objects in order to give voice to them. The point here is to try to compare different techniques of re-presentation by arguing that there are many other ways of carrying out politics than usually considered (Latour, 2007b). Rather than being an essence, procedure or domain of life, politics is something that 'moves', it 'turns around a topic' and can only exist when there is an active issue (Latour, 2007c). This political project argues that it is necessary to readdress the way that entities are analysed, i.e. to examine assemblages of heterogeneous elements, rather than to account solely for singularity in human and social aspects. This involves developing a 'cosmopolitics',[9] a term borrowed from the work of Isabelle Stengers (see Stengers, 1997). The idea of cosmos is literally to encompass every-'Thing' in political accounts. It involves a double injunction—to engage in a form of ontological politics and to allow all kinds of 'others'

to object to the stories that are being told. This approach has 'the burning desire to have the new entities detected, welcomed and given a shelter' (Latour, 2005c: 224).

Although we can identify differences between ontological politics and cosmopolitics more important perhaps are the similarities in their propositions. Overall, ANT and After's political concerns relate to how realities are enacted into being and different entities can be constructed; they highlight that things could be 'otherwise' and that realities are not 'destiny' (Law, 2007). Such politics tries to make explicit how positive and negative realities or articulations are constructed within all sorts of practices and arenas. Describing is thus about performing 'good or bad'; although rather than being treated in isolation good and bad are interwoven, or 'partially connected' (Law, 2004; Strathern, 1991). ANT and After appears therefore to have given political issues greater consideration through concern with understanding the consequences associated with the 'performance of realties' (Law, 2004). It appears, also, to shy away from assuming the 'stabilization of relations' (Latour, 2005c), trying instead to place in the foreground all controversies associated with what are usually regarded as facts. Ultimately it attempts to open the political notion to encompass disputes that are usually sundered from 'traditional' forms of politics. In this way, it clearly challenges espoused denaturalization.

These, then, are fundamental elements of an ANT version that *we* would espouse—one that has the aim of disputing the idea that ANT is apolitical. In fact, ANT and After seems to bring politics back into the approach substantially. To indicate that ANT and After deals with politics, however, is not to argue simultaneously that it can be deployed to inform a critical approach in MOS. Thus, in the next section we will discuss if ANT can act as such an analytical resource to CMS (cf. Alvesson et al., 2009: 15).

Towards a politics of organizing

ANT insights and developments mostly originate from empirical sociological investigation (Latour, 1988a, 1988b, 2004b; Law, 1986; Mol, 2002). Although the approach is rooted in the analysis of organizations (e.g. Law, 1994; Mol, 2002) it has never been perceived as contributing to field of 'Management and Organization Studies' in a strict sense. If anything, its nearest alignment has been to the sociology of work, where it has been defined as a 'non-conventional' network approach (Grint, 1991). This positioning, however, is perhaps something that has, ironically, contributed to the perspective's appeal and usefulness for MOS (cf. Czarniawska, 2009: 155).

The various ANT works based on organizations imply that such entities are perceived as continuous and unfinished, precarious and partial—a permanent process that generates more or less stable effects; a heterogeneous emergent phenomenon; a verb (Cooper and Law, 1995). Analysing organization(s) in this form—stressing that the noun 'organization' can only exist as a continuous result of organizing—challenges what mainstream MOS approaches usually accept as given or taken-for-granted (Cooper and Law, 1995; Knox et al., 2007). As such, ANT can be seen as a strong ally for moving the focus of MOS from formal organizations to 'organizing' (cf. Czarniawska, 2009: 158).

Analysing organizing via ANT, therefore, is to attempt to address by which means a diffuse and complex system, comprised of humans and nonhumans, 'becomes networked' (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1999). Organizations are outcomes and products of continuing process—relations and practices that are materially complex and whose ordering can only be addressed, locally and empirically, as 'in the making' (see Cooper and Law, 1995; Law, 1994). The approach implies that organizations and their components are effects generated in multiple interactions, rather than existing merely in the order of things (Latour, 1987, 2005b; Law, 1992, 1999b).[10]

For instance, one of the authors of this article conducted empirical research into one of the largest newspaper printing sites in the UK. Following an ANT approach, rather than depicting a site with stable and fixed characteristics that existed in the order of things, it became possible to discern how the factory was constantly enacted by the articulation of as diverse a set of elements and practices as: press operatives working on machines; paper reels being replaced and ink being distributed; budgets being made and adjusted; market data being gathered and interpreted; Health and Safety procedures being applied or disregarded … all sorts of interactions, feelings, emotions, etc. In fact, the printing site was produced in a 'multiple' (Mol, 1999) way every time its events were performed. This indicated that the site was constructed out of 'multiplicity' and its appearance of being the 'same' printing site relied on various practices, actions and performances that, while differing from one occasion to another, also maintained a sense of similarity (Mol, 1999).[11]

This research suggested that whereas the enactment of different practices making 'the factory' can be harmonious in respect of some events it can also be discordant in others. Whereas on certain occasions the way production reports were completed by press operatives and maintenance personnel was uncontested, on others controversies emerged over which particular department would be subsequently called to account for a specific fault or to sort out a particular production problem. Furthermore, within the factory there were various disputes (e.g. related to crew staffing, overtime payments, press cleaning, etc.) between management and operatives that, whilst helping to 'perform' the factory, were enacted by factors as diverse as spread sheets and charts, human resources practices, industrial relations traditions, the Managing Director's views, memories of how things used to be … (and again) interactions, feelings, emotions, etc. Each of these entities was complexly enacted into being, with for instance, the practice of Managing Director being partially granted by the conditions of occupying a central position from which s/he could have privileged access to, for example, software, databases, spreadsheets, etc. (see Law, 1999b).

To expand, the scenario of disputes between workers and managers, but within which senior managers' views ultimately prevail, is largely taken for granted in the contemporary newspaper industry. This can be contrasted markedly, however, with the situation prior to the early 1980s, when management generally played a marginal role in managing shop-floor affairs. This was instead a duty performed by the 'Chapel',[12] a largely self-governing entity whose main aim was to protect and guarantee the interests of printers (Sykes, 1960; Thompson, 1957). The nature of such disputes (or lack of them) is thus established into being through the diverse interactions of complex elements and practices, ranging from modes of performing industrial relations to the occupational consequences of agendas aimed at reducing trade union power in the UK. In this way, there is nothing inevitable and natural about the printing site. It can only exist if various entities and practices, both human and material, are enacting that site into being in a continuous process of organizing. In addition, as the Chapel example suggests, things can always be 'different', even the day-to-day handling of staff and staffing issues, seemingly the most universally accepted of contemporary management roles.

The key de-naturalization element of critical approaches to MOS therefore relates to the view that management and organizational realities are not the given order of things and as such could be otherwise. Reflecting on the newspaper industry example, we suggest how ANT and After insights may help to put organizing into the foreground of analysis, indicating that management and organizational realities are not 'destiny', this being a key insight from ANT and After politics and also an assumption of CMS (see above). As such, to analyse organizing rather than organization is not just a methodological issue, it is also a political one. ANT can thus help to strengthen a posture in which 'organizations have never explained anything; organizations have to be explained' (Czarniawska, 2006: 1557). This is a position that is not only political but which helps in de-naturalizing organizations and management.

It can be argued, however, that ANT will not assist meaningfully in the practice of de-naturalizing organization(s)—and thus in offering valuable organizational critique—if it fails to deliver CP. To take organization(s) as complex gatherings of multiple elements and practices opens up the possibility of making positive changes to particular organizational processes,[13] which is a key element underscoring the possibility of delivering CP (see Spicer et al., 2009). Similarly, for ANT and After politics, in order to modify politically a state of affairs it is necessary to appreciate that social and organizational forces are comprised of different ties upon which resistance can be applied. If domination, exclusion, power etcetera are to be analysed and challenged, it is necessary to understand how they are constructed in order to create effects (Latour, 2004c). For Latour (2005c), political relevance is related to registering as many associations as possible in order that that it may be possible to change a state of affairs through grasping its complexities and multiplicities. This is why, for Latour (1999c, 2004c, 2005c), the ANT approach is also a political project.

Empirical works drawing on ANT and After politics have thus analysed how knowledge of such associations can help us perform interventions in practice (see Routledge, 2008). In tandem, we have argued how the practical performance of interventions is a defining characteristic of CP. By way of example, Hinchliffe et al. (2005) discuss a dispute about the proposed location of a new building development in Birmingham, UK, a construction site that would have negative environmental and community consequences. They studied how the presence in the Birmingham area of creatures under threat of extinction in the British Isles, water voles, could prevent the construction programme taking place, as it is unlawful to destroy the habitats of endangered species. Detailing a series of associated controversies surrounding the detection of water voles at the location, Hinchliffe et al. (2005) described how, by engaging with factual characteristics of water voles when trying to account for their existence (e.g. they do not live in the same places as rats, their prints are different, etc.), these creatures were 'performed into being' by local ecologists' practices. By illustrating the essentially complex nature of the associations involved in performing the setting, Hinchliffe et al. (2005) were able to deploy insights from cosmopolitics in order to extend the possibilities for political action. This indicates that when multiplicity is taken into account new possibilities are opened and 'negative' aspects can be undermined.

Given the complexities of practical intervention, however, a relevant question for ANT and After politics is whether there are, as Mol (1999) suggests, 'real options' available and if so which should be chosen. This question can also be directed at the CP goal of fostering intervention in practice. Asking if it is possible to choose among options underlines a view that instead of being 'multiple', objects and realities are 'plural' (Mol, 1999). To argue that even the same entity is multifariously enacted by a different set of practices—i.e. that it is done differently, that it is ordered differently—is not to say that there are various singular versions which comprise a plural entity. Neither is it to say that there is one entity that is subjected to multiple interpretations depending on which social group perceives it. To stress the latter is to follow a 'perspectivist' view (Mol, 1999), suggesting that different individuals have, with their specific social backgrounds, to look to the same ordered effect from different standpoints and, as a result, consider it differently. This highlights the diversity of views available when expanding perspectives for examining the same entity. In most cases, such differing perspectives are mutually exclusive, discrete, and exist side by side, whilst keeping the object itself 'untouched' (Law, 2002; Mol, 2002) and thus regarded as singular. As a result, it leaves aside the multiplicity of enactments and their interrelations.

Following insights from the ANT and After literature, difference, then, is not a matter of perspectives on a single object, but the performance of different objects in different sets of relations. To avoid perspectivism this approach proposes to foreground practices, events, and the nature of materiality. As Law (2002: 59) points out 'if we are interested in multiplicity then we also need to

attend to the craftwork implied in practice … realities are not explained by practices and beliefs but are instead produced in them'. Thus, talking about multiplicity in practice demands empirical examination (see Latour, 1999c; Mol, 2002).

Mol (1999) suggests that while on some occasions different realities may include each other, on others they may be contradictory. Thus, multiplicity is not about pluralism, i.e. about separate entities that stand apart in homogeneous fields. It suggests instead that the various versions performed have relations between them—they may be opposed, but they may also be complementary. To separate them as if they were plural, however, is to bypass and ignore the complex interconnections between them. Achieving rational choice in terms of political desirability is neither easy nor straightforward (Mol, 1999). To such a view there is no general or total solution—ANT and After politics can only be taken into account in local empirical settings (Law, 2007; Mol, 2002). We are minded, however, that to seek local and specific solutions, rather than generic ones, is also an aim of some versions of CMS (see Adler et al., 2007; Alvesson et al., 2009; Spicer et al., 2009).

In this way, domination, forms of exclusion, hegemonies, racism, gender inequalities etc. are never generic effects and are not created in simple relations. As noted earlier, Law (1997b) argues in this vein that colonialism is not a single system and that that makes it a much stronger 'distribution'. Forms of domination are always performed multifariously by different sets of relations and their multiplicity has to be analysed in practice. An important element of ANT and After's 'critical engagement' (Routledge, 2008) is thus to defend, after empirical examination of specific settings, particular practices as 'more favourable' than others; as witnessed for example in ANT studies of education (Verran, 1999), health care (Mol, 2008) and animal feeding (Law and Mol, 2008). This is so because there are multiple realities which can be contrasted against one another; even though, as noted above, this is a complex issue and one that also indicates there is no 'general solution' (Law, 2008). For Haraway (2008) similarly, in terms of intervention the question is how to interfere in particular realities within particular locations in order to generate less negative alternatives, i.e. how to strengthen realities that otherwise would be fragile. The issue of undermining problematic aspects (e.g. racism, sexism, ageism)—a key proposition in the CMS agenda—and thus delivering CP, becomes one of comparing practices and helping to enact some realities rather than others within specific empirical settings.

To analyse in this manner, however, risks the charge that such arguments are restricted to sociological reverie and cannot reflect 'real' intervention or help deliver CP. ANT and After considers there is no reality outside of relations and that realities are constructed within the processes of knowing. In such a view, there is not *a priori* a researcher/object dichotomy; both are produced as outcomes of the practices of research (Law, 1994). The researcher, therefore, is not just observing, s/he is actively constructing what it is being studied.

Furthermore, for ANT and After politics, rather than simply describing realities, such accounts readily 'enact' them into being. Thus, when preferable practices are highlighted, they are given credit and can become stronger in terms of ontological ties and linkages (cf. Haraway, 2008). Analogously, when the same happens to problematic practices, they may become weaker. As such, by performing accounts that show how 'the profit imperative, patriarchy, racial inequality, and ecological irresponsibility often turn organizations into instruments of domination and exploitation' (Domain statement, Critical Management Division, Academy of Management)[14] and discussing alternatives for management and organizations, critical work in MOS may help to undermine dominant practices or, at least, to enact them in specific places where they can be challenged. This is especially important when CMS work is used in teaching, given that some students will have never come across such alternative realities.[15] Again, this is a matter of delivering CP. There always arises however the possibility that a better appreciation of the instruments of domination and

exploitation may enable unscrupulous managers to mobilize the insights of CMS to develop more sophisticated (but not of course uncontested) systems of control. Also, in terms of performativity, from what we have discussed so far ANT does not seem to foster the kind of MOS knowledge that helps to improve organizational efficiency or maximize output. As such, it does not deliver 'technical' performativity. ANT however may help to indicate that performativity is not only related to instrumentality, but also concerns how ontological ties and sociological accounts can help us to enact specific realities rather than others. There always remains, of course, the potential attribution problem that while ANT may not intend to deliver technical performativity, it may inadvertently contribute to it.

Thus far we have discussed how ANT can inform accounts that seek to de-naturalize and critically engage with management and organizations. Such an approach wishes simultaneously to avoid the creation of instrumental knowledge about management and organizations whilst fostering CP. In this respect, however, criticism has been directed against what some suggest is ANT's 'problematic epistemology'. Whittle and Spicer (2008) argue that ANT's epistemology fails to provide a thoroughly reflexive theory of knowledge. The main problems are that it: 'relies on the assumption that social life can be observed objectively by scientists using esoteric concepts', is 'understood through a process of scientific verification', and can be 'explained without a reflexive examination of the philosophical and political assumptions that accompany the researcher' (Whittle and Spicer, 2008: 9). It is argued that ANT tends to 'impose its own theoretical lexicon, attempts to verify and generalize a linear model and engages in a limited reflexivity about its own true claims' (Whittle and Spicer, 2008: 10). In light of ANT and After, however, it is possible to question such strong epistemological criticisms. The above critics take ANT as a singular whole and thus tend to disregard the nature of difference presented in the various versions of ANT (see above). Also as noted, ANT and After makes explicit that realities are constructed within the processes of knowing (see Latour, 1999a, 2004a, 2005b; Law, 2004; Mol, 2002) and thus there is not *a priori* a researcher/object dichotomy, for both are produced as outcomes of the practices of research. Hence, the researcher too is a product of research practices; s/he does not possess total command of the research process and knowledge generation. It can be misleading therefore to suggest that ANT assumes there is an external reality that can be observed by a conscious researcher, even though some early studies might be suggestive of such a position (see Callon, 1986). By highlighting the role of accounts in the production of realities, ANT and After shows that knowledge is also political. Furthermore, by helping to challenge the ontology of mainstream MOS, ANT and After offers 'materials for comparison and critical reflection, from both theoretical and methodological points of view' (cf. Czarniawska, 2009: 155). The approach therefore seems capable of delivering a sense of reflexivity for MOS.

In sum, we have argued that in 'bringing politics back in' ANT and After helps, on the one hand, to produce accounts which are capable of delivering de-naturalization and reflexivity, while on the other (in being non-technically performative) to achieve the goals of CP. As such, ANT and After can act as an analytical resource to CMS (cf. Alvesson et al., 2009: 15) through developing a reflexive politics of organizing.

Conclusions

Drawing on the 'ANT and After' literature, as well as what are usually considered key characteristics of CMS, this article has examined whether ANT is capable of offering insights for developing a *critical* perspective on organization(s). It has argued that political insights from the ANT and After literature are relevant to making explicit the performance of, for example, profit imperatives, patriarchy, racial inequality, and ecological irresponsibility, as well as bundles of relations and

associations that assist in enacting organizations as instruments of domination. In such a view, exploitation, racism, patriarchy etc. do not in themselves explain anything—they are what precisely have to be explained (see Czarniawska, 2006; Latour, 2004b, 2005c). Thus whereas on the one hand ANT, via a rejection of positivist assumptions and means-ends rationalities, has the potential to be used in ways that recognize ordering is not inevitable and could be 'otherwise', on the other CMS insights can enrich ANT, as they call attention to issues that have been frequently neglected by those applying the approach. In contrast to traditional modernist modes of critique, ANT, by defending an engagement with practices in specific settings and contexts, can help to develop a type of MOS critique which does not assume a ready-made repertory of how things are and how they should work. What ANT and After offers is to underscore the politics in organizing. ANT and After makes us consider that, rather than being treated in isolation, 'good' and 'bad' are interwoven. By proposing to analyse organizing in 'practices', ANT and After does not impose a general solution: in contrast it highlights that 'good' can only be made locally and empirically. In so doing, it can also serve to undermine the 'bad'. The issue, then, is not to 'avoid translation by ANT' (Whittle and Spicer, 2008), but to produce ANT accounts that help us develop critical theory in the form of a political ontology of organizing.

Notes

1   It is important to note that CMS has been accused of excluding other critical voices in the field (see Ackroyd, 2004; Bohm and Spoelstra, 2004; Wray-Bliss, 2004)

2   Various debates have taken place, for example, over the nature of critique in CMS (e.g. Boje et al., 2001; Hassard et al., 2001; Jermier and Clegg, 1994), whether CMS aims to produce more 'human' and ethical management practices or is against management altogether (e.g. Adler et al., 2007; Parker, 2002), etc.

3   For a defence of the accusation that CMS has advocated an anti-performative stance see Alvesson et al. (2009).

4   For Spicer et al. (2009: 541–543) anti-performativity is rather problematic as it: conflicts with attempts to promote social change and to engage with practitioners and mainstream management; causes CMS to have a consistently negative position making it unable to claim what it desires; forces CMS to be trapped and dependent on what it critiques and is contradictory to the fact that CMS research is produced with performative goals such as academics aiming for career growth through publication. Moreover, in order 'to do its business' it relies on a series of performativities within society (e.g. flights being affordable and on schedule, conference hotels hosting conferences efficiently, publishers paying copyright fees expediently, etc.).

5   The roots of ANT can also be traced back to the works of Michel Serres, Algirdas Greimas, Isabelle Stengers, Gabriel Tarde, Harold Garfinkel (for insights on these influences see e.g. Brown and Capdevila, 1999; Latour, 2001, 2005c; Law, 2007). Michel Foucault is also a source of inspiration, but ANT theorists have tried to make clear the difference between their work and his (see Law, 1992, 1994, 1999b; Mol, 2002).

6   This being the title of both a 'summit' conference held at Keele University (UK) in 1997 (to explore problematic issues in ANT, and attended by notables such as Michel Callon, Donna Haroway, Bruno Latour, John Law, Annemarie Mol and Marilyn Strathern, among many others) as well as an edited book based on selected papers from that conference (see Law and Hassard, 1999)

7   Bruno Latour's discussions about 'social construction' have a long history going back to at least the 1985 edition of *Laboratory Life* which dropped 'social' from the subtitle.

8   Law (2002: 159) suggests that enactment means 'the claim that relations, and so, realities … are being endlessly or chronically brought into being in a continuous process of production and reproduction, and have no status, standing, or reality outside those processes'.

9   For Latour (2004c: 454) 'The strength of one element checks any dulling in the strength of the other. The presence of cosmos in cosmopolitics resists the tendency of politics to mean the give-and-take in

an exclusive human club. The presence of politics in cosmopolitics resists the tendency of cosmos to mean a finite list of entities that must be taken into account. Cosmos protects against the premature closure of politics, and politics against the premature closure of the cosmos'.

10   If we consider that ANT is, as Mol (1999) suggests, 'multiple', the view presented here is just one possibility among many others.

11   We draw this argument from Latour (2005) who in turn draws on Tarde (1999) to argue that entities have to differ, or become further articulated, in order to exist as long as existence relies on repetition through difference (see Czarniawska, 2004; Latour, 2001, 2005c, 2009). Although for Tarde repetition is a key process to understanding societies, rather than seeing repetition as a simple mechanical copy, it is perceived as an adaptation of one idea or action. As a result, every adaptation is different from the next—repetition implies difference and therefore transformation (Czarniawska, 2004).

12   This is the name given to the unit of trade union organization at the workshop level. This term's origin is associated with the fact that printing was first developed in monasteries and churches. That is why the head of trade union representatives on the shop floor is traditionally called the Father of the Chapel. For a detailed examination of Chapel functions see Sykes (1960).

13   In discussing the possibilities of CP, Spicer et al. (2009: 550) curiously draw on insights from Bruno Latour, even though Whittle and Spicer (2008) argue that ANT cannot deliver a critical perspective in MOS.

14   This is basically the CMS Division mission statement, Academy of Management, USA.

15   **For a discussion on how ontological politics can be used 'to make a difference' in management education, see Hitchin and Maksymiw (2009).**

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