From Religions and Believers to Circulating Entities: ANT and the Study of Religions

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Why ANT and the Study of Religions?

- It takes seriously the postmodern criticism of modern science and its implications.
- It, however, goes beyond deconstruction and builds the theoretic-methodological program out of its results.
- It makes it possible to do a science about topics interesting for the scholars in Religions after the criticism of the concept "religion".
- It does not need the concept of religion and all the related concepts to do a research.
- It has, however, its limits:
  - useful only for those interested in how collectives are build, rebuild, dissoluted, how the order is practised and what makes and glues together the social.

ANT is myopic and moves slowly...

...but that's his consciously made decision.

Shortly to the "religion" problem

- Why "religion" creates troubles?
- Fuzzy concept which is applied - too often at the same time –
  - to the subject of the Academic Study of Religions
  - explanans which explains another things (belief, behaviour, attitudes, social change etc.)
  - explanandum which is to be explained by connection to another things (society, cognition, encounter with transcendent, improper way of thinking etc.)

Shortly to the "religion" problem II.

- Fuzzy concept
  - which connects different things into one class without further justification (like wearing hijabs and speaking with tongues, stories in old scriptures which nobody cares about and stories in the same books which drive peoples daily into actions; belief systems and everyday behavior etc.)
  - which separates interconnected things without further justification (like stories in ald scriptures in old difficult languages and stories in new movies, which drive the people to same types of activities etc.)
  - which nobody is able to define (not in generally acceptable way, but) with the use of another concepts with clear and theoretically justified meaning

Shortly to the "religion" problem III.

- A word overladen with political inrests
- As a result: the concept which seriously hinders the study which tries to get rid of the modernist political agenda related to its use.

"What is religious about it?"

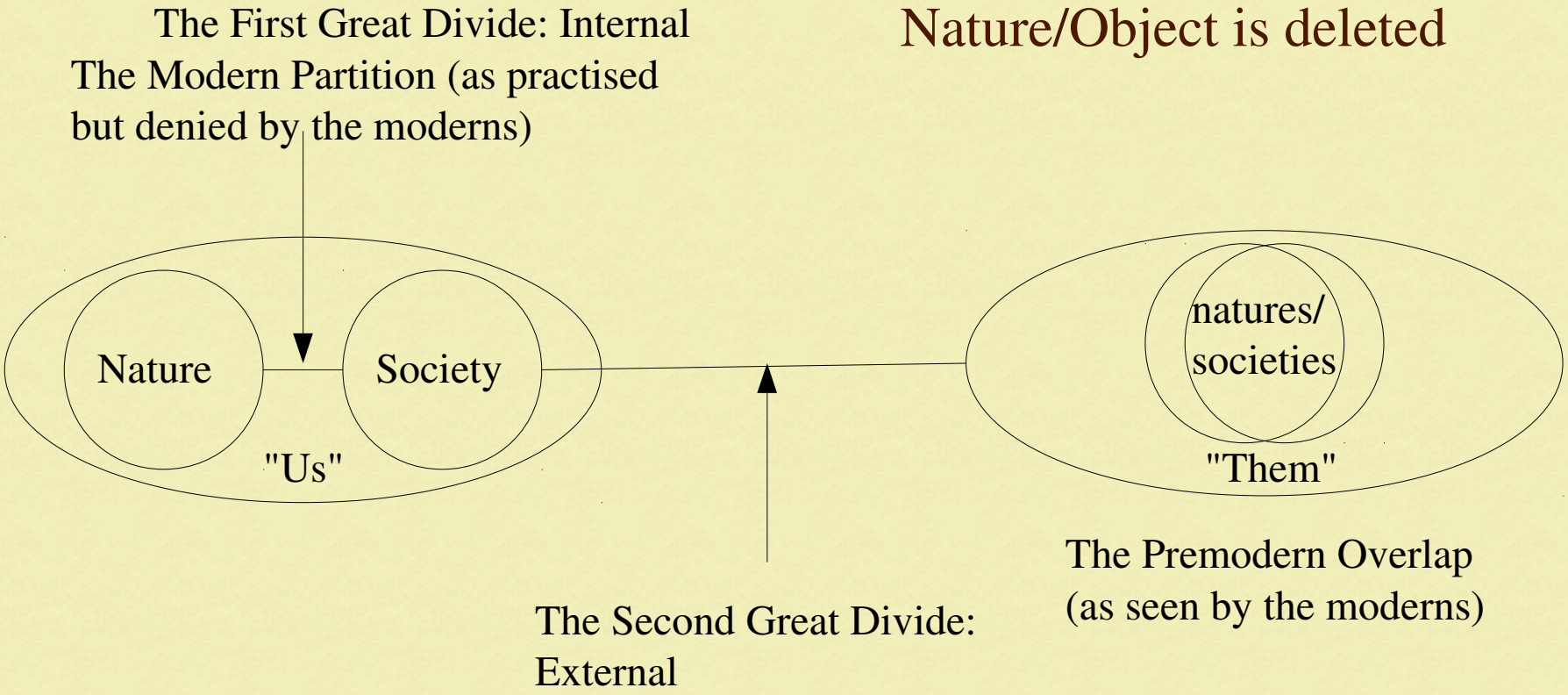
- This question needs to be dropped from the scientific repertoir.
- It is the first demand of ANT: not "to limit in advance and in the actor's stead the range of entities that may populate the social world" (Latour 2005: 227).
- "...instead of taking a reasonable position and imposing some order beforehand, ANT claims to be able to find order much better after having let the actors deploy the full range of controversies in which they are immersed. It is as if we were saying to the actors: 'We won't try to discipline you, to make you fit into our categories; we will let you deploy your own worlds, and only later will we ask you to explain how you came about settling them.' The task of defining and ordering the social should be left to the actors themselves, not taken up by the analyst. (Latour 2005: 23)

Let's make some order in ANT first

- The and of correspondence
- Symmetry
- Ontological politics
- Actors and agencies
- Sedimenation
- ANT is a part of his own research
- The field of the Study of Religion and ANT

The end of correspondence

- How to start a science with "supernatural", if it demands knowledge of "natural"?
- At first, We have never been modern: so the Great Divide between Society/Culture/Subject and Nature/Object is deleted



The end of correspondence II

- ANT is not in itself ontology, yet it allows all the relevant ontologies to enter the field (in that sense it's positivism).
- ANT does not have "godly" knowledge of reality with which to start
- he/she has only controversies concerning reality which are his/her starting point
- With use of which practices these controversies are being carried on and (eventually) stabilised? What actors are mobilised and what collectives are assembled on the run?
- What orders are so established?

Symmetry: Anthropology comes back from the tropics

- Not to study "errors" because they fall off the table of disciplines concerned with "truths", but to study "truths" and "errors", successes and fails through the same concepts.
- The way people get convinced of "truths" are the same as the ways people get convinced of "illusions".
- Whatever people believe in is a result of practices by which realities are constructed, with the help of numerous another actors which are mobilised in order to convince and to achieve the stabilisation of such realities-convictions.
- But how many realities are and how they are related?
- The answer (by Annemarie Moll 1999) is: "multiple".
- The realities are not just differing points of view.

Ontological politics

- Realities are embedded in different practices and through them connected to another realities. They can contradict each other, support each other, contain one another or the other way back – in a different setting.
- A. Moll (1999) has shown it with reference to various practices to enact anaemia in medical diagnosis.
- "So there are at least three performances of anaemia: clinical, statistical and pathophysiological. How do they relate? In textbooks they tend to be described as being linked, as being, indeed, aspect of a single deviance... In practice the three ways to diagnose 'anaemia' each diagnose something different... This does not lead to big debates, to attempts to seek consensus or even concern. It simply is how it is." (Moll 1999: 78)
- "With clinical anaemia comes the reality of conversational interaction (…). With laboratory anaemia comes the needle, the ex-corporation of blood, the controlled infliction of pain." (Moll 1999: 81). With the statistical norms for laboratory anaemia comes the differentiation of sexes..., with the pathophysiological practice comes but an individual difference.

Actors and agencies

- An actor: basically whoever/whatever makes a difference.
- However, the identity of actors – as much as the character of reality – is a matter of controversies, which the ANT scholar does not want to stabilise, but takes as the starting point in the research.
- "To use the word 'actor' means that it's never clear who and what is acting when we act since an actor on stage is never alone in acting. (…) By definition, action is dislocated. (…) [Social scientist and actors] both have to remain puzzled by the identity of the participants in any course of action if they want to assemble them again." (Latour 2005: 46-47).
- For that reason, ANT has, first of all, to record rigorously the presented account and take them seriously. If the account says: *"My deceased mother made me to do it"*, then it means exactly that. And not the "mystic experience", "encounter with transcendence" or with "supernatural".

What ANT forbids, scholars of religion especially love to do

- The question "What is religious about it?" or the plan: "I want to study only the "religious" aspect of the issue" are efficient practices and justifications for doing so.
- This way only particular realities and particular actors – the "proper religious" ones – are allowed to enter the field.
- But all those who were not allowed can teach us how ordering, forming and destructing collectives is being achieved throughout the controversies over agency.
- For that reason ANT follows slowly all translations from actor to actor in order to reassemble the collectives (of humans as well as non-humans) thus formed: he starts with controversies and learns from those involved in them, how they exactly manage them, how they stabilise them or keep them going on.

Sedimentation

- Things are not in motion endlessly.
- Some of the negotiations, interactions and practices employed throughout their passing, actors mobilised in them etc. sediment, become materialised and gain clear shape.
- Such sedimented realities can easily overtake action and become full-blown actors, i.e. mediators.
- In everyday face-to-face interaction many ingredients. Such "sediments" can make those involved act, be mobilised in their speech in order to persuade the others, be placed in space as wall and door (by people who have left the place long ago) so that the possibilities of movement or the incoming noise are limited, are worn as a dress so that the role and status defining the situation is clear to those involved.

Sedimentation II

- If they make any difference, if they do something, then their agency is channelled from one actor in the flesh to another actor in the flash through a channel which can be described and which not only translates but may be transforms its agency.
- If something does something, then this doing must be apparent from the researcher's text. If it only sits there and does not do anything, then the text has not reassembled anything.

Scholar as the part of the filed

- ANT is reluctant to say that he studies the other social actors. He rather connects "with them through some research protocol". As such, he inevitably has to remain an object in his own research.
- His/her representational practices produce material outcomes in the form of texts. Scientific texts are sedimented result in which – in a reduced form – all the actors and resources mobilised by the scientist in order to persuade the others about his truth are contained. In this sense they are displays not only of his/her research subject, but of dynamics of the scientific practices related to production of knowledge. To take one's own texts into account as seriously as whatever other types of data gives thus materialised, embodied meaning to the term "self-reflection" and makes it an empirically based practice (Konopásek 1996: 9-11).

ANT and the field of the Study of Religions

- ANT does not need to care whether there is something "religious" in his field of interest.
- He just [sic!] sets on the way to follow the translations from actor to actor in order to learn how they build and inhabit their worlds. Whatever circulates throughout these conduits and helps to stabilise or destabilise the collectives of humans and non-humans cannot escape his attention. His task is to describe it and thus to reassemble the social. To assemble the collective need plenty of work to be done by those involved. If in a scientist's account something pretends to do the job, but does not show through what kind of work, then the account failed in it's task.