Translating the Sociology of Translation

JACQUELINE BEST
University of Ottawa

AND

WILLIAM WALTERS
Carleton University

NOTE : This is a pre-publication version of the forum contribution, which appeared in International Political Sociology Vol. 7, No. 3, 2013. pp. 345-349. The final version and reference can be found at DOI: 10.1111/ips.12026_5

Actor network theory, actor-network-theory, material semiotics, the sociology of translation… The precise name of the domain in question is not itself entirely stable. And rightly so. In the ANT scheme of things society is far less stable, representation and governance considerably more disputed, and order quite a bit more precarious than most other frameworks would allow. Flux and impermanence are minor and tangled threads running throughout the history of the western political imaginary: from Heraclitus and Lucretius to Nietzsche and Deleuze. No other research framework has married this minor current with empirical inquiry in a manner that is as thorough, practical and relentlessly materialist as ANT. Bringing the Heraclitean worldview down to earth: this is one of its foremost accomplishments.

While ANT scholarship has seen certain prominent attempts to define and delimit it as an approach (Latour 2005), others have resisted this move (Law 1999), insisting that we keep things fluid. We side quite definitely with this latter position. It seems to us utterly consistent with the epistemology that ANT has done so much to advance. Not another school, another theory to be imported, but an open-ended play of translation.

What does it mean to translate the sociology of translation? What it most certainly is not is translation in the style of Berlitz: the writing of a phrasebook that makes a foreign country navigable to an outsider. Neither is it a matter of setting out ANT's principles in order to apply them to the subject matter of IR. Instead, working with the premise that the sociology of translation is already diffusing into IR, we offer a few questions that interested researchers might consider. These are provocations intended to point to the possibilities and pitfalls that the sociology of translation might pose to international relations scholarship. By attending to the challenges of secrecy, the potential violence of translation, and the limits of expertise, we suggest, we may begin to develop a sociology of translation that is open to the politics of its own production.

When the Blackbox is Locked (and Hidden): the Challenges of Secrecy

One of the maxims of ANT is to "follow the actors" (Latour 1987): observe as far as possible what they do as much as what they say. In Callon and Latour's case this has

often meant following scientists, planners, investors as they enroll and become enrolled by others. This maxim has proved more or less transposable to other locales like the international organization and the trading floor, in which such networks of translation play a crucial role in enabling and transforming international practices. But note that a key presupposition here is that it is possible to access and observe the relevant (human and non-human) actors. So what does one do when certain actors are invisible, obscured or inaccessible? What happens when their enrolments and interessement take place inside the secure perimeter of the weapons research laboratory, or behind the cloak of state secrecy? This is not to suggest that ANT researchers who are observing corporate life or environmental politics are not also faced with secretive practices. But the fog of secrecy is especially thick the closer we get to the heartland of national security issues. The blackbox is a locked box. And often hidden.

One answer is that researchers become like investigative journalists and dig deeper to uncover the truth. But a second answer is more consistent with the spirit of ANT: the researcher must now follow the trail of those mediators who have made it their task to name and open up worlds of secrecy. Personae like the investigative journalist and the whistleblower, techniques like freedom of information requests or wikileaking now become a part of the network that one studies. If secrecy is itself not merely a withholding of truth but a governmentality itself (Masco 2002), entailing systems for classifying access, coding and storing documents, if secrecy has its own practical and material density, then so do the various practices of truth-telling and exposure that sometimes emerge as its agonistic counterpart. These must become moments in the play of translation that we follow. We do not search for the truth of the object that lies behind the cloak of secrecy but rather follow the lines and translations by which it is made public.

The Violence of Translation

How well has the sociology of translation dealt with violence and the less subtle forms of power? Power relations tend to take two forms in this literature: as the struggles among actors over enrollment within particular networks (Brown and Capdevila, 1999), or as the effects of various concrete practices that give shape to those heterogeneous networks (Law 1992). Both conceptions resist grand structural narratives and focus on the mechanics of power, differing from Foucault in their closer attention to the ways in which objects as well as humans are linked together to produce such dynamics. Yet both have also been criticized for their inattention to the role of domination and inequality in social life.

Violence is certainly recognized within some ANT scholarship as one of the spectrum of operations that may be used to build networks and enroll actors—and dis-connect others. But it has a rather low profile compared with the more peaceful methods of interessement that feature in ANT tales.

Yet, one does not have to subscribe to generalizations about the "anarchy" of the international system to recognize that in all its heterogeneity violence is ubiquitous in international affairs. It is easy to be seduced by the irenic mood conjured by the word "translation," and to highlight only the crafty way in which things like carbon emission standards or stock options enroll actors into networks. But as Mitchell (2011) has shown in his impressive study of the building of transnational oil networks, a richer account of

translation is possible once we recognize that the liquidation of opponents is as much a part of the assembling and disassembling of worlds as the chemical engineering of certain liquids. It is not a matter of juxtaposing "consensual" versus "coercive" mechanisms of enrolment and dis-enrolment, for they overlap in many ways. But it is a matter of better theorizing the full range of powers that are at play with any foray into the troubled waters of international life

What Gets Lost in Translation: Expert Practices and their Limits

It should be remembered that the particular intellectual origins of the sociology of translation are to be found in the sociology and anthropology of science and technology, a field of study that has been particularly focused on the materiality of knowledge production. Science and technology studies (STS) scholars have examined the processes through which scientists' observations of various things (such as fruit flies and guinea pig guts) are translated into claims of fact and forms of expertise that are so powerfully black-boxed that they are beyond dispute. Replace the laboratory with the material world of international development or security, and the scientist with the bureaucrat and the politician, and you have a set of analytical tools for examining how expert authority works in the international context, as various actors seek to translate the messiness of the world into authoritative claims about poverty or war.

This attention to the social and material dimensions of knowledge-production is a useful antidote for the tendency of some practice-oriented IR scholars to emphasize tacit or practical knowledge and to differentiate it from more reflexive, formal kinds of knowledge, a division that is arbitrary. The concreteness of this conception of expertise also usefully complicates narrowly discursive or ideational approaches to the subject, which can too easily reify expert knowledge and exaggerate its power.

Yet the sociology of translation is not entirely immune from such tendencies to overstate the power of expertise. Although earlier works by Latour and Callon note the limits of these processes of translation—as they discussed the problem of a scientist encountering "bad" guinea pig guts or a community struggling with recalcitrant scallops (Latour 1987; Callon 1986)—later work by them and others has tended to downplay these gaps and limits. For example, in international political economy, many scholars have built on Callon's work on the performativity of economics to point to the immense power of economic forms of calculation and measurement—such as the Black-Scholes formula or Value at Risk calculations—to produce the world that it purports to describe (e.g., MacKenzie 2006). Less attention has been directed to the failures, slippages and unanticipated consequences of such attempts to translate the messiness of economic life into tidy algorithms. If we hope to translate these insights concerning the practical production of expertise into the international realm, then we also need to be attuned to what gets lost in translation.

The sociology of translation has often been faulted for its reluctance to reckon with the activity of politics. Only recently has it begun to factor politics more fully into its worldview (Barry 2001; Latour and Weibel 2005; Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe 2009). When our subject matter is the world marked off as "national security," when we note the violence of many processes of translation, when we attend not only to the power of expert practices but also to the politics of their failures, then the sociology of

translation has no choice but to engage fully with political activity. Perhaps it is this insistence on the political, messy though it is, that is both the challenge and the promise posed by those who seek to translate the sociology of translation into the realm of international politics.

References

BARRY, ANDREW. (2001) *Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society*, London: Athlone Press.

BROWN, STEVEN D. AND ROSE CAPDEVILA. (1999) Perpetuum Mobile: Substance, Force and the Sociology of Translation. In *Actor Network Theory and After*, edited by J. Law and J. Hassard. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

CALLON, MICHEL. (1986) Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay. In *Power, Action, and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?,* edited by J. Law. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

CALLON, MICHEL, PIERRE LASCOUMES AND YANNICK BARTHE. (2009) *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

LATOUR, BRUNO. (1987) *Science In Action*. Milton Keynes: Open University.

LATOUR, BRUNO. (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

LATOUR, BRUNO AND PETER WEIBEL, Eds. (2005) *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

LAW, JOHN. (1992) Notes on the Theory of the Actor-Network: Ordering, Strategy and Heterogeneity. *Systems Practice* 5: 379-393.

LAW, JOHN. (1999) After ANT: Complexity, Naming and Topology. In *Actor Network Theory and After,* edited by J. Law and J. Hassard. Oxford: Blackwell.

MACKENZIE, DONALD. (2006) *An Engine, Not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

MASCO, JOSEPH. (2002) Lie Detectors: On Power and Hypersecurity in Los Alamos. *Public Culture* 14 (3): 441-467.

MITCHELL, TIMOTHY. (2011) *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London: Verso.