

○ VOLUME 16 NUMBER 2, 2017

Relating to International Relations

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How things 'relate' is, in no small measure, a foundational matter of concern in science and technology studies (STS), especially in the small world that I have come to inhabit, namely, the scholarly community surrounding actor-network theory (ANT). The material-semiotic approach adopted by actor-network scholars was, in fact, originally developed to trace how 'associations' (big and small, human and nonhuman) hold together or are blasted apart. As a member of this camp, the author conceives of scientific communication as an object of disciplinary 'relating' (or 'associating') and shows evidence of a predatory, less than collaborative style of relating between STS, ANT, and IR in the context of academic gatherings (i.e., conferences, seminars, etc.) and academic writing (i.e., publications produced by scholars and read as part of disciplinary training). The author acknowledges that the import of concepts from one field to another is always messy, but that a less imperialistic tone could be set in IR regarding how it 'uses' insights from STS, especially from ANT. Examining the conduct of political science together, for example, would be a more productive, collaborative research site for IR and ANT than the current status quo.

Introduction

How things 'relate' is, in no small measure, a foundational matter of concern in science and technology studies (STS), especially in the small world that I have come to inhabit, namely, the scholarly community surrounding actor-network theory (ANT). Obsession over the relationship between humans and so-called nonhumans, for example, is what ANT is perhaps most well known for. Much of that discussion hinged on assigning agency, or the perception of agency—too much agency was allotted to humans, while too little was allotted to nonhumans, per sociology's outwardly obvious pro-social bias. ANT was supposedly a kind of corrective lens to adorn such that one might

see things more clearly. We were urged to understand how humans and nonhumans relate by seeing and seeking-out their fundamental commonality, namely, that they both had agency and that that agency was the same sort of agency and not of some other (or a different) kind. That is, no doubt, one way to consider the relationship between STS, ANT, and international relations (IR); we can know how they relate by finding some commonality that they share. Love of acronyms comes to mind. Interest in the anthropomorphization or personification of nonhumans like 'the state' also ranks high. But that would all be an unfortunate and fruitless distraction.

This is because 'relating' is active, enacted, and, therefore, best observed in the practice-worlds of actual individuals. There is, thus, no such thing as a relationship to be teased-out or characterized between STS, ANT, and IR. Of course, in the parlance of our times, saying that two or more things, for example, people, have 'no relationship' typically implies either the absence of a relationship or a very poor quality, near-non-existent relationship. I mean neither of those two meanings. There is no relation to speak of because there is only 'relating'—actively relating. That insight from ANT is enshrined in Bruno Latour's (1987) book-title *Science in Action*, a reminder that science is not so much a thing but a way of doing that is enacted in practice and it is within those practice-worlds of inquiry that the monolithic enterprise of Science can be observed, first-hand. Relating is no different. Relating happens in a particular time or place, and includes more than sanitized accounts of the field common in scholarship.

So what sort of 'relating' does IR actually do? Apart from the obvious (i.e., that disciplines do not relate, scholars do), the sort of relating that best reflects the active view of science promulgated in my small world of actor-network scholars must fit among—perhaps, between—the related articles in this special issue by Isaac Kamola (2018) and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (2018) respectively titled 'Memories from Conferences Past' and 'The Personal Is Panoramic: On Surviving the Disciplining of the Discipline'. One object of our relating is found in scientific communication, in this case, academic gatherings (i.e., conferences, seminars, etc.) and academic writing (i.e., publications produced by scholars and read as part of disciplinary training). In examining both forms of scientific communication, this article helps sketch out 'the terrain of a new [research] programme', as described in the introductory remarks of 'Baring our Internal Relations?' which actively reflects on 'relations as they exist' (Taylor and Fishel, 2018, p. x).

As evidence, the author draws from two sources. The first source is personal experience at an academic gathering wherein, one might say, STS, ANT, and IR 'first met' in 2012. The second source is drawn from a series of articles featured as 'IPS Forum Contributions' for the journal *International Political Sociology* in 2013. In what follows, the author examines the academic gathering, the journal articles, and how they compare and relate. The author shows evidence of a predatory, less

than collaborative style of relating between STS, ANT, and IR that spans various forms of scientific communication. As most readers will no doubt know from experience, the world of academic conferences and scholarly publication are not two static, separate venues, but intimately related, for reasons fair and unfair, as the authors contributing to this special issue demonstrate all too well.ⁱ

Academic gathering as a means of relating

I entered this human drama over e-mail. In science and technology studies, our major annual meeting is held by the *Society for the Social Studies of Science*, which, in 2012, was held jointly with the *European Association for the Study of Science and Technology* from 17-20 October at the Copenhagen Business School. Jan-Hendrik Passoth and I were organizing and chairing an open session at the event 'On states, stateness and STS'. Also, the exact dates of the events that unfold from here are unexpectedly significant.

On April 11, 2012, we received abstracts for blind review. To our surprise, two abstracts from international relations were submitted, and they were trying to do science and technology studies. As shameful as it is, in retrospect, I must confess that I felt a certain parental quality overtake me, as though I were observing someone play with an object they did not yet fully comprehend. My first instinct was to cultivate and to smooth their path to science and technology studies rather than shut the proverbial gate and keep them out of the event. After all, the entire reason I took to organizing sessions at science and technology studies conferences was to create an inclusive space to talk about states.

STS gathering

Later on, once the program was published, I learned that the papers were written by graduate students. First paper, "Towards a Common Future": On How a Diplomatic Training Programme Socialises States into the International Society', was written by Tobias Wille and the second paper, 'Inside/outside again? Private security companies and the formation of 'modern' assemblages in Eastern Congo', by Peer Schouten. I had previous knowledge of the second author because, as chance would have it, Peer had trouble uploading the paper to the 4S website and he had inquired over e-mail whether or not he could simply send us his paper directly. That meant I had a glimpse of his topic in advance. It also constituted, at least for me, my first direct contact with an actual IR scholar from within the small confines of science and technology studies. Wille's paper was about training diplomats at the German Federal Foreign Office (FFO) in Berlin to represent states and Schouten's was about material assemblage of private security and public governmental regimes in post-conflict Congo. While Jan and I accepted the papers on their own merits, I recall pondering, with memorable internal struggle, whether or not I would have pressed to accept the papers even if they were without merit, accepting them for sake of inclusion rather than by criteria of quality. While that was not

necessary, I confess to wanting a dialogue—some dialogue; any dialogue—with an audience of experts on states, and I saw scholars in IR this way: scientific experts on states and the international.

At any rate, two weeks after accepting the papers, I got another e-mail. Peer wrote Jan and I about an opportunity to share our work with IR scholars, rather than the other way around. Attending seemed like fate, given that we had a draft manuscript in-hand and the timing was just shy of perfect.

From Peer:

date: Wed, Apr 25, 2012 at 8:37 AM

subject: CfP 'Accounting for heterogeneities in the international'

Hello both

Just wanted to draw your attention to below event which takes place partially overlapping the 4S conference. Nevertheless, it touches upon many of the stuff you both work on as well.

Best wishes,

P

In the attached call for papers:

... the aim of this event is to bring to the fore the potentialities and pitfalls of working with 'thinking tools' that hail from beyond the traditional disciplinary horizons of IR, such actor-network-theory (ANT), science, technology and society studies (STS), or performance theories.

'Accounting for heterogeneities in the international: writing symmetry, engaging with criticality' was a post-conference seminar hosted by *Theory Talks* and *Millennium*, convened by Rocco Bellanova, Julien Jeandesboz, and Peer Schouten, and held on Monday, October 22, 2012. It was appended to the 2012 Annual Millennium Conference at the London School of Economics, which started the day that 4S concluded (October 20, 2012).

I replied:

date: Wed, Apr 25, 2012 at 9:53 AM

subject: Re: CfP 'Accounting for heterogeneities in the international'

Wow—that fits us to the letter.

Jan, should we go? We gotta, right?

Peer, thanks for bringing this to our attention.

And so did Jan:

date: Wed, Apr 25, 2012 at 11:27 AM

subject: WR: Re: CfP 'Accounting for heterogeneities in the international'

Of course we should! Hope our sessions in Copenhagen will not overlap, but if either the London session is on the 21st or our Copenhagen ones are finished until the 20st we would be happy to participate!

Thanks Peer!

I was so excited about the prospect of hosting IR guests at an STS event followed immediately by being an STS guest at an IR event that I blogged about it perhaps five or so minutes after seeing confirmation from Jan.

In Copenhagen, six months later, the panel was unfolding badly, at least, on paper. In the first session, two of our five presenters were not in attendance. The presenters enjoyed the space of an additional five minutes, which, no matter how well prepared, one seems always to need. The audience was curious, heads cocked, ready with questions; questions that we actually had time for. Jan and I put Tobias's paper at the tail-end of the first session because Peer's paper was scheduled for the start of second session and we wanted to stretch the IR-theme across both sessions. Tobias's paper on training diplomats garnered the lion's share of the questions. The STS-filled audience was interested in what they deemed a thoroughly unorthodox use of the black-boxing concept in the context of learning, in this case, how the ability to black-box concepts such as the state is a skill taught to diplomats so that newspaper-headline-esque phrases like 'Greece is broke' or 'Germany bales out Spain' seem appropriately unproblematic during the course of political communication. For sure, I had never seen black-boxing used this way; in STS, we are more interested in observing when the black-box is opened-up than when it is closed. But not for Tobias. For us in STS, his use of the concept was curious. It was the same with Peer in session two. In the context of 'failed states', Peer was talking about private security and public governance entering into not a 'social contract', which we were all more or less familiar with, but a 'socio-material contract'. And the intellectual lights were flashing. I had the fleeting sense that all manner of concepts with 'social' as a primary component-part could be re-fashioned for use in STS by simply appending '-material' to the 'social'. I started to flip through a list of concepts in my mind, searching for concept-opportunities like these from political science, economics, sociology, and wherever else I could come-up with 'social' concepts. Again, the audience was intrigued with this outsider's understanding of STS concepts and, in particular, the use of STS concepts, which came-up during discussion: there are

unstated rules about how, when, and why to apply an STS concept in a particular situation that you cannot learn from the concept itself; rules that these IR scholars apparently felt no need to follow. Those sessions were back-to-back on Thursday, October 18, 2012. On Friday evening, I flew to London.

IR gathering

After being the last to arrive at the London School of Economics annex building, Jan and I were the first to present at the seminar. I did not recognize anybody except for Peer and the folks sitting to my left and right, namely, Andrew Barry—who I know from STS—and Jan—my long-time collaborator—respectively. The paper presentation, ‘Who is Acting in International Relations?’, was about decentering humans in models of the state, in particular, testing the theoretical outer limits of a human-free, totally dis-inhabited state. We adopted an actor-network approach to analysis, and began the talk with:

... a post-humanist question about political agency. Who acts in international relations? From state theory generally, and the field of International Relations specifically, one readymade answer is: ‘states do’—so long as we assume states to be the high-modern regime of nation-states that so dominantly sorted-out conceptual possibilities of political agency during the 20th century and laid the groundwork for globalization. An alternative approach to global politics, in contrast, searches for political power beyond the state. Contemporary shifts toward neo-liberal and other transnational regimes are reshaping the political landscape that enables entities beyond the state to gain importance in governance. Scholars are, thus, left with two viable options: we can see states as entities capable of acting on the stage of global politics, or we can see states as one of many patterns through which political activity is enacted. As it happens, this dichotomy neatly parallels how agency has been conceptualized in social theory: either we swallow the bitter pill of essentializing a high-modern model of human nature to understand how monolithic actors like the state establish, maintain, and transform political order, or we join the deconstruction camp and dissect the nano mechanisms, techniques, and discursive patterns that surround and, ultimately, eclipse fully this model of human nature, which will then one day, as Michel Foucault famously stated, be ‘erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea’. In this talk about who acts during international relations, we engage this tension and develop a model of the state wherein the human element, as near as we are able, is maximally de-centered.

The presentation went well; the audience was attentive and respectful.

In the question and answer period that immediately followed, I would call the intensive inquisitiveness of the group ‘aggressive curiosity’. The presentation itself felt like a pretense for subsequent extraction, which I did not anticipate. Few, if any, questions were about the presentation. Members of the audience asked for clarification on ANT and then questioned us about how to use ANT concepts. In retrospect, we were being asked to share tacit knowledge about the field and the

'appropriate' use of ANT. From notes I took at the event, we were asked to distinguish ANT from STS, and indicated that ANT is an approach that numerous scholars in STS (and beyond) adopt, but that the two were not synonymous. We clarified that ANT cannot simply be adopted and employed as a ready-made theory. 'But it's called actor-network THEORY, how can it not be a theory!?' I recall hearing. This is the topic of Latour's (1999) famous essay 'On recalling ANT'. Latour (1999, p. 15) writes:

I will start by saying that there are four things that do not work with actor-network theory; the word actor, the word network, the word theory and the hyphen! ... It was never a theory of what the social is made of, contrary to the reading of many sociologists who believed it was one more school trying to explain the behaviour of social actors. For us, ANT was simply another way of being faithful to the insights of ethnomethodology: actors know what they do and we have to learn from them not only what they do, but how and why they do it. ... [Rather than a theory, ANT was] method to learn from the actors without imposing on them an *a priori* definition of their world-building capacities.

Without irony, much of the question and answer period seemed like translation, mainly, us translating our concepts and making them consumable for scholars in IR. Some members of the audience, as I recall it, were predatorily eager to learn about STS and ANT, as it were raiding the 'cabinet of curiosities' in STS and taking them back to employ them in IR. My final note reads: 'we may have been invited, but I think we were also on the menu'.

Scholarly publications as a means of relating

Most commentary about the conduct of Political Science is generated from the perspective of IR scholars, and comparatively less input comes from scholars in STS, although an important exception is Barry (2013). The contribution of this section is to document some emerging traffic patterns between IR and ANT from an STS perspective, and, also, to make IR scholars aware of what is at stake when appropriating 'thinking tools' from ANT, with special emphasis on a series of articles featured as 'IPS Forum Contributions' for the journal *International Political Sociology* in 2013.

Debates that are great

From the outside looking in, IR is generally known for its preoccupied insularity, in particular, navel-gazing associated with 'Great Debates' internal to the field (Dune, Cox & Booth, 1999). There are four—possibly five, but probably not (Brown, 2007)—of these great debates, which, in brief summary, include: first, realists debating idealists over the necessity of state survival amid the possibility of fully-functioning international institutions; second, realists debating behaviorists over emphasis on empirical Political Science amid the tradition of historical and interpretive analysis; third, realists, institutionalists, and

structuralists debating over which paradigm best models international relations with concerns over what multiple incommensurate paradigms co-existing might mean for the field at large; fourth, positivists debating post-positivists over plausible and allowable epistemological conditions for truth production in the field. Ironic in the view of some, intense critique (or debate) underscores the significant value of the object (or objective) undergoing critique (Bartelson 2001). Apparently, great debates may imply that IR is thoughtful and self-reflective.

Playing identity politics

As a point of comparison, and with sympathy for any scholar critical of IR's preoccupation with establishing a common mythology punctuated by debates that are great (see, e.g., Jackson 2013), ANT is rarely framed this way. For example, the lugubrious ellipsis that concludes the opening-line of Best & Walters's (2012, p. 345) contribution to the *IPS* forum neatly illustrates the 'label fatigue' scholars experience when happening-upon ANT; they write, '[a]ctor-network theory, material semiotics, the sociology of translation...' in relating to ANT's various monikers. Bueger (2012, p. 339) bemoans the same frustration, stating 'it is difficult to provide a clear-cut answer' to the question 'What is ANT?', and then proceeds to join in on the same sort of label fatigue, adding 'actant rhizome ontology' and 'philosophical anthropology', 'to name but a few' on the growing list of names for ANT; as it happens, he states, ANT has '[a] vast number of alternative labels proliferating'.

Bueger (2012, p. 339) indicates that ANT suffers from identity 'confusion'; he speculates either 'ANT lacks a coherent identity' or that ANT will not perform 'a coherent identity in the [familiar and conventional] sense of an "ism" or a "paradigm"' that IR scholars, who he addresses in his piece, are apparently more comfortable with. This insensitivity to identity politics is perplexing. While ANT's 'precise name ... is not itself entirely stable', this can be accepted, according to Best & Walters (2012, p. 345), if one accounts for the necessity of logical consistency between ANT's concept-set and ANT as an approach to inquiry; to wit, they write, '[i]n the ANT scheme of things, society is far less stable, representation and governance considerably more disputed, and order quite a bit more precarious'.

The implicit message appears to be that if the concepts model fluidity, then the label those concepts fall beneath should follow and demonstrate the same sort of fluidity or at least be granted the freedom to elect fluidity over fixity. Are ANT's multiple names a commentary on disciplinary identity politics and the freedom to self-identify, multiple times if necessary, and without need for external justification? Alternatively, is IR right about ANT's identity confusion, or that what appears like a disorderly or incoherent identity is, in fact, orderly once the self-application of concepts onto the approach that deploys them is taken into account? Either way, that IR scholars are debating ANT's identity politics for themselves, in the absence of ANT voices, is a curious form of relating. For sake of clarity, the idea of multiplicity being

mentioned in this discussion generally refers to an ontological form of existence neatly captured by the phrase 'more than one, less than many'. The phrase implies that any observable singularity is simultaneously a distributed assemblage of ordered or arranged component parts, which may be numerous but not infinite in number. *IPS* authors identify a number of these outwardly visible singularities, for example, 'the state', although one can find multiplicity lingering even in casual everyday statements, for example, 'it's the law' or 'plan for the future' wherein one observes that:

[t]he vast complexity of the future or the law is collapsed into a singularity. The "less than many" disclaimer is meant precisely to avoid the infinite regress scholars would surely encounter if they were left only with the "more than one" mandate; without the disclaimer, after counting from one to two, there would be an infinite horizon; scholars would not know where to end; and, at that point, researchers would become *de facto* members of the deconstructivist camp. (Rowland & Spaniol, 2015)

Just as with internal debate, critique of ANT naming practices serves primarily to underscore the value of that which undergoes critique (see, e.g., Bartelson 2001). Still, scholars critical of IR's disciplinary identity and self-established mythology may find—if nothing else—a new mode of inquiry not merely for conducting IR research but also for studying the conduct of science within IR (i.e., as a subfield). So, if critique implies that ANT has value for IR, then what use-value is there to be extracted?

What can I use it for?

Bueger (2012, p. 338) sums it up best by anticipating that IR scholars want a clear-cut answer to the question: 'What can I use it for?' This is, for sure, echoed in my experience at the 2012 Millennium conference wherein 'What can I use ANT for?' was surely voiced alongside other questions such as 'If it is not a theory, then what is it?' and 'What's it got for us in IR?' as though invited guests were being asked to defend ANT to their hosts. In response to inquiries like these, Bueger (2012, p. 339) identifies a reasonable middle-ground, indicating (correctly) that ANT provides the analyst 'a minimalist set of concepts and a parsimonious ontological language', such that, in answer this self-imposed question about use: using ANT means inventing and reformulating 'ideas in the context of actual problems and situations'.

Best and Walters (2012, p. 333) contribute by framing a narrative of 'use' for the forum; they write, 'in this forum, we have invited our contributors to consider how we might translate the sociology of translation for the purposes of researching international politics', wherein, 'to translate is to establish relationships of equivalence between ideas ... that are otherwise different'. Again, using ANT emerges as a theme: how can IR best harvest, by way of translation, insights from ANT?

While drawing faithfully on Latour's (2005, p. 5) redefinition of sociology as the 'tracing of associations', Porter's (2012, p. 334) contribution to *IPS*, 'Tracing Associations in Global Finance', nevertheless follows the same framework of 'use' set out by Best & Walters (2012). Porter (2012, p. 334) shares 'some insightful uses of actor-network theory' in research on global finance. While many uses of ANT are highlighted, I will summarize only a few to justify my position that this is a one-sided relationship. For example, one use of ANT is corrective: 'ANT's insistence on tracing out associations is a valuable corrective to the common tendency to see global finance as involving large, powerful, unstoppable forces operating independently of humans' (p. 335). Another use of ANT is meta-conceptual: ANT 'developed useful insights into the relationship between epistemology and politics', in particular, regarding the role of '[s]cientific experts' in the development of politically influential market-relevant 'measuring devices' (p. 336). In all, Porter's (2012, p. 336) 'short commentary ... provided some examples of the usefulness of ANT for understanding global finance'.

Next steps towards a conclusion

Results confirm that scientific communication is an object of disciplinary 'relating'. From my seat, however, 'relating' to IR and witnessing how ANT is being made to relate to the study of international politics has been a decidedly suboptimal experience. To this end, the author shows evidence of a predatory, less than collaborative style of relating between STS, ANT, and IR in the context of academic gatherings and scholarly writing, and contributes, thus, to a fresh line of research that aims to document and reflect upon 'relations as they exist' internal to IR and how they exude outward (Taylor & Fishel, 2018, p. x). In light of IR's understanding of ANT's disciplinary identity and the palpable language of 'use', I would be remiss not to initiate space for a dialog and clarify a few issues about ANT for IR scholars, based largely on my perceptions being reviewed and reviewing for scholarly publications that prominently feature some combination of IR and ANT insight.

First, STS and ANT are often conflated when viewed from a distance; however, they are not synonyms and should not be used interchangeably. For example, Best & Waters (2012, p. 348), in the final section of their *IPS* contribution, 'Translating the Sociology of Translation' appear—and this is my perception—to shift between STS, with its emphasis on how scientific experts make claims that become facts (or fail to) through a number of social and material processes, to how 'the sociology of translation', another name for ANT, 'is not entirely immune' from the tendency 'to overstate the power of expertise', with immediate reference to Michel Callon and Bruno Latour. While I may be overstating my case at this point, please note: STS is a shared interdisciplinary space for scholars to gather around topics of scientific controversy, the history of technology, philosophy of science, and ontology of artifacts, although this hardly exhausts the rich and varied interests of scholars waving the banner of STS. That said, while all of ANT was once situated in that small corner of the academic world called

STS (see, e.g., Bueger 2012, p. 338), it has now branched out far and wide, and this is likely because, as Barry & Slater (2002, p. 178) put it more than a decade ago, ANT was always:

more than an approach to the sociology of science and technology. It was offered, rather, as a way of rethinking the very idea of society as a domain distinct from nature and from technical artefacts, and as a way of bypassing the distinction between social structure and agency.

Thus, not only are STS and ANT not synonyms, which was a common misperception voiced at the 2012 *Millennium* post-conference seminar, this reality becomes truer with each new application of ANT outside of STS.

Second, given the fecundity of ANT outside of STS, it is worth noting that conceptual tools from the ANT workbench can be adopted selectively. Research may be selective with regard to analytical emphasis placed on, for example, human and nonhuman agency. Consider Patrick Carroll (2012), a comparative historical sociologist who studies state formation, who adopts a model of human and nonhuman agency that is relative, meaning that while human and nonhuman agents all have agency their relative agentic status is not necessarily equal or inherently identical. Porter's (2012) piece is a relevant example from the *IPS* forum. Porter (2012, p. 337) states that '[i]t is important to recognize the role that distinctive properties of humans such as strategic calculation, trust, creativity, greed, or panic play' in any complex series of events, which is an analytical counterbalance for the siren-like temptation to accord inanimate objects too much or ill-suited agency. That said, ANT influences on inquiry routinely co-mingle with other post-pluralist, (relational) materialist, and post-humanist insights as well as other influences of that ilk, which is precisely what Nexon & Pouliot's (2012) *IPS* piece addresses. Also, in my experience, ANT is often presented as a critical alternative to whatever traditional theory dominates some disciplinary area or is adopted as a *carte blanche* opportunity to do or say things considered unconventional to some disciplinary area. Please take note that the actor-network approach's concepts and tools are minimalist and so flexible that they can be—and have been—used and abused in this way, even by its progenitors.

Third, ANT is not a theory, despite the label, and, as such, cannot simply be used or applied (Latour 1999). This, as mentioned, was also an oft-bemoaned concern voiced at the 2012 *Millennium* post-conference seminar. Additionally, in the *IPS* forum, Porter (2012, p. 337) (correctly) claims 'ANT provides unique theoretical insights', while Best & Walters (2012, pp. 333, 334) (less correctly) characterize ANT as a full-fledged 'theoretical perspective' and a 'theoretical approach'. Another misperception of ANT in IR is not merely that ANT is a theory, but that ANT is specifically a political theory. While Porter (2012, p. 337) critiques ANT for missing-out on 'the distinctive characteristics of politics', Bueger (2012, p. 340) claims 'ANT is a political theory'. In

Bueger's (2012, pp. 340, 341) defense, his claim that 'ANT is a political theory' presupposes that ANT 'directs us [in IR] to examine how single actors gain the authority to represent the whole', rather than adopt some other more traditional, less Foucauldian default assumption about power and authority associated with (political) representation, which, in turn, 'encourages us [again, in IR, and, presumably, elsewhere] to build new conceptual apparatuses which do not rely on prior ontological commitments but take worlds of practice as a starting point'. Still, ANT is not a theory. Rather, ANT is a precaution against assuming taken-for-granted ontologies as we 'follow the actors' and observe their heterogeneous practices *in situ*. In my view, a theory explains something based on ideas independent of the thing being explained, and ANT does not 'do' that. The actor-network approach orients the gaze of the analyst rather than explains what the analyst observes; moreover, ANT also explicitly cautions readers from assuming that our concepts are divorced from our worlds of observation, and, to wit, conceptual attention to performativity, enactment, and ontology have done much to cultivate this microcosm of insight (Passoth & Rowland, 2010). Similar to the way that ANT is a 'negative' method in that 'it says nothing about the shape of what is being described with it', ANT is also a negative theory, more a series of warnings, attitudes, and precautions for the conduct of science, which is why it is not a theory at all (Latour 2005, p. 142). For an example crucial to IR, according to Latour (1999, p. 18), 'by following the movement allowed by ANT, we are never led to study social order ... that would allow an observer to zoom from the global to the local and back. In the social domain there is no change of scale. It is so to speak always flat and folded'. Again, ANT's contribution, according to Latour, (1999, p. 19) is a '*negative* contribution'; from the start, '[i]t was never a theory', 'ANT was simply another way of being faithful to the insights of ethnomethodology'.

Fourth, the more appropriate way to adopt ANT is by adopting an actor-network approach to inquiry, which implies adopting a 'nonhumanist disposition' during analysis with regard to the potential agentic force of nonhuman objects and a 'postplural attitude' toward inquiry with emphasis on ontology and the enactment of those objects in practice. Adopting an actor-network approach is often associated with a Post-ANT literature (Gad & Jensen, 2010). Early actor-network scholars gained prominence for their unorthodox insistence on the agency of inanimate objects; however, as ANT spread, its concepts were appropriated—often inappropriately—and by an ever-growing number of scholars, which called into question the potential of ANT to direct inquiry at scale (Law 1999). In response to the infelicitous use of ANT, scholars laid the groundwork for a post-ANT literature to restore foundational insights and guide future research. As Latour (1999, p. 20) admits:

I agree that we have not always been true to the original task, and that a great deal of our own vocabulary has contaminated our ability to let the actors build their own space, as many critiques have charitably shown ... This weakness on our part does not mean,

however, that our vocabulary was too poor, but that, on the contrary, it was not poor enough.

The aim, thus, is for a kind of poorness—a commitment to conceptual poverty. This is precisely why claims that ‘[i]deas from ANT will enrich our theoretical and methodological repertoires’ in IR (Bueger, 2012, p. 338) or that ‘ANT has the potential to make significant contributions to answering big questions’ (Nexon & Pouliot, 2012, p. 345) may inspire, but also ring hollow.

In conclusion, I would be remiss not to acknowledge that the import of concepts from one field to another is always messy. After all, that is how translation always goes, and Best & Walters (2012, p. 333) faithfully import the idea in all of its complexity, sharing ‘it has to be stressed that in any moment of translation, there is always an element of transformation and perhaps betrayal’. And I will be the first to note that their translation is anything but a betrayal; the concept is mindfully relevant to its very application, and treated as such by Best & Walters (2012), capturing the methodological reflexivity woven into scientific concepts (see, e.g., Passoth & Rowland 2013). To wit, as Latour & Woolgar (1986, pp. 275-276) put it during the early days of laboratory studies, revising our:

epistemological preconceptions about science raises awkward questions about the nature of its social analysis. Can we [as social scientists] go on being instrumentally realist in our own research practices while proclaiming the need to demystify this tendency among natural scientists?

The question was surely as provocative then as it is now, and it is satisfying to observe scholars in IR mull it over some four decades later. And notice to what end: according to Best & Walters (2012, p. 333), no matter how ‘promising, we do not set out to treat ANT as a new theoretical model for international relations scholarship’, for to do so ‘would only repeat the import syndrome so common to IR’ and ignore translation, ‘one of the most important insights to come out of recent debates in the sociology of science and technology’. Carefully monitoring the conduct of Political Science, in this case, how concepts are translated from ANT for ‘use’ in IR is *both* a strategic research site for collaboration between IR and ANT *and* it would be consistent with the spirit of methodological and conceptual reflexivity at the heart of the actor-network approach.

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Note

ⁱ To wit, this article (that you are reading) was originally presented at the 57th *International Studies Association* annual convention in 2016 (March 16-19, Atlanta, Georgia); the paper was titled 'Why IR and ANT are (not) good bedfellows' on a panel titled 'Internal Relations' convened by Stefanie Fishel and N.A.J. Taylor and chaired by Elizabeth Dauphinee.

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