
Guest editorial: Out in the field with Bruno Latour

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Preliminary note by Franck Cochoy and Hervé Corvellec

This special issue grew out of an invitation from Albert Mills, one of the journal's Editor Emeritae, to Barbara Czarniawska to honor Bruno Latour's life's work, knowing that Barbara knew him well and appreciated him enormously. Barbara suggested "something along the lines of Bruno Latour, our guide to fieldwork and beyond" (personal communication, 10 October 2022), explaining that Latour and Woolgar were among the most successful in bringing anthropological methods to organization studies in their *Laboratory Life*, continuing by many methodological insights collected in *Pandora's Hope* and other texts. When the journal accepted the idea, she invited us to join her in the project. Together we drew up the call for papers that constitute the first part of the text below. The three of us managed the first submissions, the first and, for some articles, the second rounds of revisions and even accepted the first articles. But with her health failing, Barbara was forced in her final weeks to withdraw from the editorial process before passing away on 7 April 2024. It was without her that we completed the project that she had initiated.

We have chosen to put her name first so that this thematic issue is also a tribute to her. Barbara was not simply a keen reader of Bruno Latour's work. She introduced him to the field of organizational studies, a field in which he occasionally recognized himself. Inspired by his work, Barbara extended Latourian notions of translation and diffusion to management (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996). As an add-on to actor-network theory (ANT), she also coined the notion of action net (Czarniawska, 2004, 2010) to explain the birth, persistence and disappearance of organizations. She even had Latour translated into Swedish. Let this special issue be yet proof of the care she has taken throughout her career to create links, disseminate ideas and create alignments where none existed before.

As well as being the inspiration for this issue, Barbara Czarniawska is very much present in the contributions that make it up, as can be seen not only from the list of references, but also from her prominent presence in the contributions, another indication of her importance as a trailblazer. It is with infinite sadness that we write these lines, a sadness that several of the contributors shared with us. But we are also honored to have been able to work so closely with Barbara right up to the end.

Highlighting Bruno Latour's contribution to the methodology of studying organizations

Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar were among the most successful social scientists in bringing anthropological methods to organization studies in their *Laboratory Life* Latour and Woolgar (1979). Anticipating the wave of symbol-focused and cultural studies of organizations, *Laboratory Life* was the first close-up picture of work that was not done in the normative spirit of action research or "company doctors." Unlike many later studies of organizational culture, it focused directly on the work itself, what people do when they are working and not on such surrounding rituals as coffee drinking.

In all his works, Latour (1991) propagated a symmetrical anthropology, which best fits a scholar who accepts his suggestion that we have never become completely modern. Tables, lists and recipes are undoubtedly the modern props of organizational knowledge, but it is equally instructive to examine non-modern modes of knowing that are still present in contemporary organizations. Oral histories may be as valid as official documents. His symmetric anthropology opened an endless row of new objects of study.



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A book that contains a great many methodological insights is *Pandora's Hope* Latour (1999b). Especially the chapter on "Circulating reference" Latour (1999a) has become a source of inspiration for young researchers looking for new and interesting ways of conducting field studies. In it, Latour described how he followed the chain of translations that changed the soil samples taken in the Amazon Forest into a scientific paper. The lessons for social sciences, according to Latour, were quite a few. The main was that by jumping to conclusions concerning power as the cause of events, social scientists spend too little time on objects and too much time on humans, misled by the confusion between intention (often considered a privilege of humans) and action (a capacity shared by all sorts of entities, be they human or not). This asymmetry should be redressed by a methodological and theoretical acknowledgment of the agency of non-humans and therefore their contribution to shaping the world. In consequence, an encouragement to follow objects (or quasi-objects) was one conclusion of this study.

In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour (2005) sought to convince students that scholars of "the social" need to abandon the recent idea that it is a kind of essential property that can be explored and measured; originally, the word meant something connected or assembled. The question for social sciences is therefore, "How do things, people, and ideas become connected and assembled in larger units?" ANT, inspired both by the semiology of Algirdas Greimas and the philosophy of Michel Serres, is a manual to the procedure required for answering this question. The research route begins with an identification of actants – those humans and non-humans that act and are acted upon. The researcher should then follow their trajectories – a series of programs and anti-programs – until some of the actants become actors, i.e. acquire a distinct and stable character, while the others fail to do so and are only acted upon. Actants that became actors are those whose programs succeeded in combating anti-programs (alternatively, those whose anti-programs won, as in the stories of opposition and resistance). Such success is due to association achieved: the formation and stabilization of networks of actants who can then present themselves as actor-networks. Consequently, ANT, despite its name, is rather an approach to fieldwork than a theory.

Following how Latour worked, rather than only reading Latour's works, is one of the best examples we may rely upon when conducting research and attempting to account for the world. What is more, it is not just a guide to fieldwork. Latour's writings also show organization scholars how to combine science with literature in *Aramis, or the Love for Technology* Latour (1996) and how to combine words with pictures in *Paris: Invisible City* (with Latour and Hermant, 2006). Arguably, Latour did not conduct much fieldwork in his later works, for example, in *Down to Earth* Latour (2018) and its sequel *After the Lockdown: A Metamorphosis* Latour (2021). However, his symmetric anthropology remains as powerful when applied to climate change as when it was applied to life in the lab.

A great number of management and organizational scholars have been inspired by Latour's ideas and practices, including those studying accounting, project management, operation management, marketing, innovation, technology management and many more (sub)disciplines. The contributors to this special issue present studies informed by his multifaceted approaches to fieldwork and writings. In this respect, they show that "the Latour way" is still followed and constantly renewed and that it is one of the most fruitful approaches to account for organizing matters.

Contributions

This special issue consists of this Introduction and six articles. The first two contributions show that Bruno Latour was an author who influenced the personal lives of his readers, or at least some of them. In the first of these personal accounts, Maira Babri describes how Bruno Latour's entry into her intellectual universe has had a lasting impact on her theoretical and methodological approaches to organizations. Among the Latourian concepts that have

influenced her approach, she focuses on the recognition that ANT gives to objects in order to introduce the notion of method as democratizing. The symmetrical way in which Latour recommends looking at the agency of things, she explains, has enabled her to broaden her vision of democracy to welcome heterogeneity rather than hierarchy. From herself to her role as a researcher, Latour helped her to become more inclusive and able to express differences while keeping open spaces for disagreement and ultimately to come together around issues and matters of common interest and concern. In the second of these personal accounts, Elena Raviola and Marta Gasparin follow Latour as a guide for their research “excursions.” In some respects, Latour invites the authors to take a method in its etymological sense as a way to travel, or, in the literal sense, a path, a track, a road. In many organizational studies, methods are often understood as an abstract, cold, rigid and rigorous protocol – a kind of preset template that researchers must choose before applying it to their subject. In contrast, following Latour’s recommendation to “follow the actors,” Raviola and Gasparin present their methodological journeys as real walks in the archives of the Danish furniture company Fritz Hansen, in the Øresund Bridge that serves as a border between Denmark and Sweden, or in Linnarhult, a recreational area in Gothenburg. These journeys confirm that “research hiking” is not without its dangers, dead-ends and uncertainties, but they also show that such a sport is the best way to make thorough exploration and personal discoveries: along the paths the reader will encounter a golden egg (chair), the socio-technical enactment of real borders (as opposed to the fantasized hermetic lines dreamed of by too many people) and the poetic contribution of willows, which proves capable of transforming a banal park into a pleasant, inclusive public space.

Following these two contributions with a tone of a personal mode, two more contributions show the methodological relevance of Latourian concepts to the analysis of organizations. The first of these conceptual contributions is the concept of “trials of strengths,” which Peter Skærbæk, Tim Neerup Thomsen and Kjell Tryggestad use to explain the *Birth of a Bridge* (a reference to Maylis de Kerangal’s novel of the same name, which, as a side comment, should be on the literature lists of business management courses). After having described in detail how the bridge passed various trials of strengths, the authors leave it up to readers, in a playful spirit that Bruno Latour would probably approve, to determine whether the notion of trials of strength has itself passed its trial of strength in their article. The second conceptual reference is the dynamic play between programs and anti-programs that Gabriella Wulff uses to explain how the Swedish retail sector faced the disruption of the COVID-19 crisis. The author teaches the following Latourian lesson: we will better understand what organizing means by focusing on dis-organizing. The COVID-19 pandemic came as a big mess, she shows; the pandemic came as a “kick to the anthill,” as the French would say. Then ANT and ANT-like actors serve to save the anthill of contemporary organizations: (re-)organizing the retail sector, Wulff shows, is about overcoming the oppositions of various programs and anti-programs, realigning human and non-human actors and reinventing the organization in the Latourian way, i.e. building the collective based on the creative articulation of all available resources, be they human or non-human.

Finally, the last two contributions illustrate how Bruno Latour can help us see the world differently. The first renews our idea of business careers based on Latour’s classic idea of translation and, implicitly, Latour’s opposition between society as done vs society in action (Latour, 1987). If, like most organizational theorists, you take a career as someone’s observed trajectory, you reduce it to a set of individualistic traits and accomplishments (you summarize – “on résumé,” in French – careers to what is written on a resume!). But if one follows Hannelore Ottilie Van den Abeele following Latour, meaning that if one looks at careers “in the making,” one realizes that such trajectories are more about finding one’s way, moving forward through trial and error and interweaving complex and numerous threads rather than following linear paths and articulating oneself in proliferating networks and thick collectives. Lastly, Andrzej

Wojciech Nowak invites us to revisit Christopher Nolan's recent film *Oppenheimer*, accompanied by Bruno Latour. Nolan may be a successful filmmaker. But his on-screen representation of the making of science is full of clichés that hide from the public how science is actually made. Bruno Latour can help debunk the myths, for instance, about technoscience, says Nowak. Debunking myths: this is perhaps the nicest tribute that can be paid to a philosopher turned anthropologist, historian of science and occasional organizational theorist and art curator.

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