

**Dispatches from a time capsule? Moving the ANT, normativity and democracy discussion  
ten years down the road: an intervention in the Boelens-Rydin-Webb debate**

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Planning Theory for final version!**

So the genie has finally been let out of the bottle, or perhaps, to some – Pandora’s Box has been opened (cf. Latour, 1999). After years of fruitful, but partial, engagement with Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as a research approach in the field of planning studies (see for instance Healey, 1997; McGuirk, 2000; Hillier, 2007; Jacobs et al., 2007), we now have a planning approach that claims a direct and explicit grounding in ANT: Luuk Boelens’ ‘Actor Relational-Approach’, APA (Boelens, 2010a) – the publication of which has been followed by a stimulating and important debate in recent issues of *Planning Theory* focusing on the most gainful ways of translating the insights and research procedures of ANT into the field of planning studies (Rydin, 2010; Boelens, 2010b; Webb, 2011; Boelens, 2011).

Even though I to a large extent agree with Webb’s nuanced reading of the possibilities and considerable risks related to a generalized “Actor-Relational Approach” to planning, as

explicitated by Boelens – and also agreeing with Rydin’s questioning of the strength of the relationship between the ARA and some of the core assumptions of ANT, my intention with this debate intervention is to nudge the discussion in a somewhat different direction. More specifically, I wish to seize upon the opportunity to question some widely propagated claims about ANT, claims that have also been repeatedly and seemingly unproblematically reproduced by all the contributors in the Boelens-Rydin-Webb debate. The claims that I would like to put into doubt are the repeated assertions that ANT does not, has not and cannot deal with normative issues regarding morality and democratic politics. In the following sections of the text I will begin by reviewing the claims that so far have been made in the Boelens-Rydin-Webb debate regarding ANT, normativity and democratic politics. Thereafter I will present a brief and impressionistic exposé of some of the ways through which ANT researchers have been grappling with issues of normativity, morality and democratic politics during the past decade or so, by finally rounding off with a short discussion on the potentials for applying contemporary, explicitly value-oriented ANT research to the field of planning studies.

### **The (supposed) normative lacks of Actor-Network Theory**

In his original *Planning Theory* paper on the Actor-Relational Approach, Boelens (2010a) invokes Actor-Network Theory, together with urban regime theory, as the theoretical basis for his approach (p. 31). In a review section in the paper Boelens sets out to examine Actor-Network Theories, as exemplified by the writing of scholars such as Latour, Callon and Law. Concerning Actor-Network Theories, Boelens reports that he tries to “explain their usefulness, but also their profound omissions and imperfections” (p. 31). Further on, Boelens develops his argumentation on what these “profound omissions and imperfections” would

consist of. According to his rendition, the “main focus” of ANT is on “how things have got this way and how they work, not how we can make them better and under which conditions” (p. 38). On the contrary, he continues, “the actor-network theorists are very cautious and reluctant to take any normative, proactive stance” (p. 38). In relation to “a proactive skill and science such as planning” Boelens concludes that this is “an insuperable shortcoming” (p. 39). To round off his review of ANT Boelens further states that for ANT as a theory “democratic legitimacy is still not a point of concern” (p. 39). The assertions (or rather, allegations) concerning ANT’s lack of concern with normativity and democratic legitimacy presented by Boelens in his paper are then seemingly unproblematically reproduced by the following entrants into the debate on ARA and ANT, Rydin (2010) and Webb (2011). For instance, Rydin (2010) states that the criticism that ANT “is insufficiently normative and not concerned with democratic legitimacy” is “probably correct” (Rydin, 2010: 266), while Webb reproduces the assertion of ANT’s “lack of normative focus” and “inability to consider the essential needs of future generations (and environmental sustainability) as anything other than discursive weapons” (Webb, 2011). So, consequently, with the repeated reproduction of these assertions, the supposed normative and democratic-legitimate lacks of ANT are being performed as something alike to what John Law calls a “collateral reality” (Law, 2009a), a taken-for-granted, unproblematic and commonsensical statement of ‘how things just are’. It is this apparently taken-for-granted assumption that I now wish to contest and attempt to destabilize.

### **Locating the Boelens-Rydin-Webb-debate**

In his paper on ARA, Boelens primarily appears to be basing his rendition of ANT upon a reading of an ‘ANT classic’ – Michel Callon’s 1986 seminal study of scallop cultivation at St

Brieuc Bay (Callon, 1986). For sure, this text constitutes one of the key readings of Actor-Network Theory. Still, considering that Actor-Network Theory very much is a living and thriving academic enterprise entailing a constant and expanding production of new research, it might appear a bit quaint to base global remarks, such that “democratic legitimacy is still not a point of concern” for ANT, upon a twenty five-year old text. Even if Boelens makes cursory references to more recent ANT related texts (Law, 2004; Latour, 2005a), it cannot be denied that the corpus of ANT writing being invoked by the previous debaters to argue for what ANT (supposedly) ‘is’, ‘claims’ and ‘does’ is becoming perhaps a bit ‘of vintage’. Basing a quite global claim that ANT – as a contemporary, remarkably active research field – lacks a normative focus and does not concern itself with democratic legitimacy, on readings of a quarter of a century-old texts, as the previous debaters appear to do, could be considered quite a contentious move, which means that their argumentation and criticism of ANT runs the risk of being directed at what perhaps could be called an ‘ANT straw person’.

ANT has been an influential part of the intellectual landscape of planning-related academic disciplines such as science studies, sociology and human geography for decades – if not as a “mainstream” approach, then at least as an accepted or at least tolerated constantly present heterodox alternative. In the above mentioned academic fields, issues regarding the (supposed non-)normativity of ANT have been debated for the better part of two decades, something which is also noted, *en passant*, by Boelens (2010a:38).<sup>1</sup> This debate was perhaps particularly heated in the 1990s, and at the turn of the millennium ANT-scholars were still perhaps, to some degree, grappling to find ways of introducing political and moral normativity into their theories. But the precise point I wish to stress here is that this was

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<sup>1</sup> In this context it is interesting to note that Boelens’ claim about ANT’s lack of normative focus and disregard for democratic legitimacy reverberates with similar claims recently posed in the seminal “scale debate” in human geography, see further Jones et al., 2007 and their extensive citation of Wainwright, 2005.

more than a decade (and hundreds of ANT-texts!) ago. ANT as a research field has not been frozen in time since then, and especially if we subscribe to an ANT-inspired ontology and see a world where phenomena are immanent and in constant emergence, we must recognize that ANT *anno 2010* cannot be judged by the same standard as ANT *anno 2000* or *anno 1986*. During these years, ANT as a research theory, practice and field has been constantly evolving and changing – and in actuality, evolving and changing to such a degree that I would like to claim that not only have issues of normativity and democratic legitimacy been introduced into ANT-research during the past decade, they have rather come to *dominate* the field.

### **ANT, normativity and democratic legitimacy**

“Actor network theorists”, as staged by Boelens, “are very cautious and reluctant to take any normative, proactive stance” (Boelens, 2010a:38). Still, for the past decade or so, central ANT figures such as Callon, Latour and Law have all repeatedly occupied themselves with issues regarding normativity and democratic legitimacy. Also other ANT-related scholars such as Annemarie Mol and Noortje Marres have a strong and explicit normative and political angle to their work. The writings of Bruno Latour – perhaps the most cited ANT-scholar of all – are today normative to such a broad extent that it remains an open question if his work can be labeled as social scientific research, or rather should be categorized as political and moral philosophy. Drawing on, and wrestling with, (normative) philosophers such as Michel Serres, Isabelle Stengers and Peter Sloterdijk, radical ecologists such as James Lovelock and classical pragmatists such as Walter Lippman, William James and John Dewey, Latour has not only written prolifically on, from his perspective, normatively good research practices (Latour, 2004a; Latour, 2010), good morality (Hache & Latour, 2010), good

cartography (November et al., 2010), good architecture (Latour & Yaneva, 2008), good ecology (Latour, 2004b) and good religion (Latour, 2001; Latour, 2009) – but also extensively on good democratic politics (Latour, forthcoming; Latour, 2005b; Latour, 2003a; Latour, 2003b; Latour, 2002a; Latour, 1998).<sup>2</sup>

It is impossible to do the huge and diverse body of normatively positioned ANT-texts any justice in a brief debate intervention of this kind, but a common denominator between most of them is perhaps that they seek to further extend the franchise of the endeavor that Warren (1992; quoted in Hajer & Wagenaar, 2005) calls “expansive democracy” – a striving towards a radical democratization of society, reaching into spheres that have previously been shielded to different degrees from direct democratic insight and influence, such as scientific laboratories and R&D labs, but also to further democratize institutions in society which already are nominally supposed to be governed in a democratic fashion, such as different institutions within the state apparatus. Even if, as stated above, it is difficult to neatly describe the whole field of normative ANT writing within a general categorization, we can perhaps take our cue from John Law (2009b) and divide up ANT normative positions into three broad categories of normative strategies: *constitutional*, *descriptive prescriptive* and *interfering*. Whereas early ANT normativity (of the type criticized by Boelens and others as not being sufficiently normative in their eyes) is described by Law as a type of *descriptive prescription*, for Law, Latour’s programme of cosmopolitical compositionism is characteristic of a *constitutionalist* strategy, where Latour in his political and moral writing attempts to

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<sup>2</sup> In this context, it is important to clarify that it is difficult to categorize Latour’s texts in these neatly compartmentalized terms, since one of his key missions is to blur the distinction lines between these and similar fields to highlight the ever-present entanglements of issues across ontological-, epistemological- and disciplinary-categorical divides. With regard to most of Latour’s writing, it is therefore fruitless and counterproductive to attempt to single out which texts are ‘more’ political and which are ‘more’ ecological or ‘science studies’, as his texts show that these categories are shown to be all entangled with each other. See further for instance Latour, 2005b.

outline some basic principles and procedures of “due democratic process” through which hybrid collectives, consisting of both humans and non-humans, might come to constitute themselves in forms that are as inclusive, open and as iteratively expandable as possible in the formation of an ever expanding “common world” (see particularly Latour, forthcoming; Latour, 2004b; Latour, 2003b; cf. also Hache & Latour, 2010).

In contrast to this type of constitutionalism, which Law for many reasons is critical of (to a large extent echoing broader post-structuralist critiques against the possibilities of social justice in any form of generalizing structures), Law posits the normative strategy of *interference* as an alternative to constitutionalism. According to Law, an *interfering* normative strategy builds upon the performativity of knowledge practices in themselves, whereby the re-description of objects of study “interfere” in the (re)production of these objects, and contribute to “move” them and “re-do” them (Law, 2009b:8). It is about writing descriptions that are “also intended as interventions”, and which function as “powerful but specific and situated tools for working in and upon particular analytical and political problems” through tying together and shifting both conceptions of what “is” in the world, and concomitantly what is “*right*, best, the appropriate form of intervention” (Law, 2009b:9-10, emphasis in original). Law explicitly positions ANT scholars such as Ingunn Moser and Annemarie Mol, who both have a strongly evident emancipatory vein in their writing, in this category – and one can suspect that he would also place his own writings in this company.<sup>3</sup>

There are also many other interesting explicitly normative ANT-scholars who are not mentioned, or only mentioned in passing, in Law’s paper. For instance, Noortje Marres’

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<sup>3</sup> In opposition to more constitutional ideas of democratic legitimacy, Law argues this position forcefully in Law (2008). In the eyes of commentators he here succinctly shows that “[i]nvolvement and normativity is a precondition, not only for those who execute politics and *do* political decision making, but for the study and research of politics as well” (Asdal et al. 2008:8, emphasis in original).

thought-provoking doctorate thesis (Marres, 2005) on the democratic merits of public controversies and their displacement into various spheres of society, whereby issues are opened up and democratically productive entanglements are created – a text which probably could be categorized as primarily building upon a normative strategy of interference. Worth mention also are both Michel Callon and collaborators' research on the relations between identity formation, associational democracy and technical democracy, and their (cautiously) normative discussions on how these ideas can reinforce and invigorate wider frameworks of representative democracy (Callon & Rabeharisoa, 2003; Callon & Rabeharisoa, 2008; Callon et al., 2009). In its general pitch, this work could probably be described as being resemblant of a somewhat “soft” constitutionalist approach.

### **Concluding reflections**

The very short and sketchy account of normative thinking and writing within the broad field of Actor-Network Theory presented in the previous section clearly shows how central ANT-scholars have been passionately engaging themselves in discussions on democratic legitimacy for more than a decade – whether it is through more constitutionalist approaches, such as those of Latour and Callon, or more ‘typically poststructuralist’ approaches of normative interference, such as Law’s. We most definitely have the right to disagree with what they tell us on these issues (they also disagree with each other all the time!), we can dislike their concrete proposals for democratic institutional design, such as Latour’s proposed “bicameral constitution” (Latour, 2004b) or “parliament of things” (Latour, 2005b), we can take offence with their somewhat Machiavellian disregard for traditional democratic procedures, as in Marres politics of “issue displacement” (Marres, 2005), or with the perhaps naïve belief in associational democracy, such as in Callon et al.’s



modeling of “technical democracy” (Callon et al., 2009); but we definitively *cannot* legitimately claim that they are “cautious and reluctant to take any normative, proactive stance” or are unconcerned with “democratic legitimacy”.

Perhaps the most important inspiration we as planning scholars can draw from ANT concerning issues of normativity and democratic legitimacy relates to the recurring question, also constantly debated within our own ranks, of how the democratic franchise can be radically extended: how can we facilitate “expansive democracy” (even to non-humans)?<sup>4</sup> Some of the methods proposed by ANT-thinkers on this point are most definitely mind-boggling in relation to more traditional definitions of democracy, or as Latour perhaps would have put it, they are most probably ‘cosmopolitically risky propositions’. But they are valuable food for thought, as their proposed redefinitions of ‘what is’ in reality – their *ontological politics* (cf. Mol, 1999) – have potentially radical consequences for how we view our world, and how we stake out the direction in which we believe it should be heading. Perhaps, pronouncing the moral imperative of sympathizing with a rock (yes, *a stone* – cf. Hache & Latour, 2010) might sound like an absurd proposition to many planners, and a proposition which could be hard to swallow part and parcel, but these types of radical injunctions and perspectives still force us and urge us on, not sway away from the difficult questions – to again and again reconsider what we mean when we say ‘normative’ or ‘democratic’, and this – if anything – must be important to us as planning scholars with a particular interest in planning theory.

So the Pandora’s Box of ANT in planning studies has most definitely been opened wide. For some planning scholars, the broadly announced introduction of Actor-Network Theory as a

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<sup>4</sup> Latour would most properly claim, though, that his political programme is far more radical than this, cf. Latour, 2007:3-4.

basis for planning research and practice, as heralded in by the Boelens-Rydin-Webb-debate, most probably amounts to nothing less than just another poststructuralist stab at the perceived theoretical heart of their beloved discipline. There is no room here to attempt to ameliorate any such suspicions, even if they are most certainly misguided.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, I would like to end this commentary by pointing to the concluding argument of Bruno Latour's essay-collection *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Latour, 1999), where he reminds us that according to the legend, what was left on the bottom of Pandora's Box when all the horrors had escaped was *hope*. This hope and urge for a more democratic, and dare I say, also *sustainable* world order populated by humans and non-humans in coexistence is something that the Actor-Network Theorists repeatedly try to communicate to us. And who knows, if we really poke around in the corners of the ANT-box, perhaps we might even find a few strange and exotic but useful tools lying around, tools that may help us take but a few tiny steps closer towards the vision of a more democratic and sustainable world. Whether Boelens' Actor-Relational Approach rightfully can be considered as such a tool or not obviously remains a moot point.

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<sup>5</sup> For a deeper understanding of Latour's non-iconoclastic and non-deconstructivist programme, see for instance Latour, 1999; Latour, 2002b; Latour 2003b.

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