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Mol, A.

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REPLIK

A LETTER TO GEORG KNEER

Annemarie Mol

*Abstract:* In answer to the text written by Dr. Georg Kneer, below you find a letter that I address to him. It is a polite letter, as the genre requires. But it is not a nice letter. Because Kneer is so blandly judgemental, no, worse, scathing in his text, he left me with few options. I had to fight back. And so I do. Thus, I point out that in his contribution Kneer does not discuss my text, nor, for that matter, any other version of Actor Network Theory, as he was asked to do, but, instead, dismisses them. Adding insult to injury, he does not do so after carefully engaging with ANT-work. Instead, he dreams up the enemy that he seeks to crush. It makes one wonder if he even read my text.

Dear Georg Kneer,

Allow me to start with a question: have you even *read* my text?

But yes, of course you have. I get a pat on the head for being *amusing* because I compare scientific facts with Camembert cheese. But *this* isn't me being funny. Here's a quote: "We may say that the laws of Newton may be found in Gabon and that this is quite remarkable since that is a long way from England. But I have seen Lepetit Camemberts in the Supermarkets of California. This is also quite remarkable, since Lisieux is a long way from Los Angeles" (Latour 1988: 227). This is great, isn't it? It is indeed one of my favourite quotes. Of course it comes from Bruno Latour. Who else weaves sentences that are so cheerful, beautiful, strong and vicious all at the same time? It is therefore with pleasure that I pass on the compliment. "Highly amusing yet instructive," wasn't it?

But wait, you tell me that you *do* relate to something specific to my text? Indeed, you do. When I argue that "network" is not necessarily the best term to describe relatedness between "actors" as it has trouble capturing co-existence *in difference*, you mention that: "Mol lands herself with new problems". What problems? Here they are: "This stands in marked contrast to other statements found within ANT". Fascinating. Of course "this stands in marked contrast to other statements found within ANT". It was *meant* to. This is called debate. In this way (and ways like this) I (and others who try to get a grasp on "difference") try to add to, rejuvenate and adapt the actor network tradition that helped to in/form us. Maybe I was not loud or clear enough when I wrote that *ANT is not a Theory*, or that, if it is, then this changes *what a "theory" is*. If ANT is a theory, I tried to say, a theory becomes a bustling family-like mess of related, shifting, sometimes clashing, notions, sensitivities and concerns. Rather than being consistent. As this did not get through to you, let me underline once more that it

is not a *problem* for me that there are *contrasts* “within ANT”. On the contrary, I celebrate it.

It may of course also be that your misunderstanding follows from the weird habit in some parts of academia of discussing Theory and its *consistency* quite separately from the messy realities within which academic work is *situated*. This narrow focus may have led you to overlook the fact that ANT does not quite fit the mould of the Theory you dream about. So let us shift to the situatedness of ANT. You want to be sensitive to situatedness, don't you? You do call for a pragmatic attitude. You say that we have to “choose” our terms depending on “our epistemological interests and goals”. But (excuse me for making yet more trouble) this is a bit thin. Two points.

First, you suggest that Latour committed a grave error when he wrote, in *The Politics of Nature*, of a “spurious *asymmetry* between human intentional action and a material world of causal relations”. He should not have made such ontological claims but have stayed calm and pragmatic instead. But what if he had? Do you think that by abstaining from vigorous statements, he would have convinced an audience involved in ecological debates (for that is what he was trying to do)? Would they actually have *listened* if he had told them that “a pragmatic understanding of language might allow us to talk about humans and materialities in symmetrical terms, were this to serve our goals”? I don't think so. It isn't just vocabularies that may (need to) shift between contexts. This also goes for *styles*. How shall I put this? I might say that a pragmatic demeanour may be fine so long as you move among language theorists, but isn't very helpful if you happen to have worldly goals relevant to a slightly wider arena. (There is a world out there, Georg. Or should I call you Dr. Kneer? These habits differ so much between languages!) I might also say that it is strange that you call for pragmatism in relation to *terms*, but forget that there might also be “pragmatism” – or another kind of context-sensitivity – in relation to entire *intellectual projects*. What if Latour is crafting a *style* that he hopes will work in the context where he seeks to interfere?

The question then is how to do so. And here we come to my second point: How exactly to think of context-sensitivity? You draw on a specific strand of pragmatism when you suggest that we should calmly *choose our terms depending on our goals*. But where do these goals come from? Goals are not given in the order of things. Instead, they come into being (emerge, crystallize, take shape) *along with* the terms we use to talk about the world. And these words, in their turn, cannot be chosen *de novo*. There is no neutral ground outside language, where we may consider our words, or deliberate about them, without using words – and without being used by them. There is always language already. Your kind of pragmatism takes goals to be given and vocabularies to be optional. As it happens, that is not very context-sensitive after all: there are few (if any) real life practices that fit such a description.

This is not to say that we should not *mind our words*, discuss our language, or care for our vocabulary. You reproach me for (in your eyes) suggesting such carelessness. You say that I claim that ANT can “make do without work on theory and concepts”. This is a very strange reproach, especially in the light of the rather detailed work on theory and concepts that I happen to *do* in the text you were supposed to comment on. On and on I go, about Theory and theory, and about the terms “actor”, “network”, “mode of ordering”, “co-ordination”, “logic”, “association”, “tinkering” and “doctoring”. Again, therefore, my question: did you *read* my text? Or does my discus-

sion of all these terms not count as *work*? Or, yet again, do these terms not count as *concepts* since I accept their fluidity? Are proper “concepts” necessarily clearly defined, and does work on them always come to firm conclusions? But that was exactly the contested issue, wasn’t it? For “Theory” (with a capital T) may well take itself to be coherently built from firmly defined concepts, but *actor network theory* is a loose assemblage of – how did I put it just now? – “related, shifting, sometimes clashing, notions, sensitivities and concerns”.

More about “concerns”. It is striking how absent they are from your text. You talk of ecology as a potential goal. You mention science and technology as a topic. That is it. Other than that, your entire text is concerned with Theory and Theory alone. By contrast, texts from the ANT tradition link the laws of physics with the cold chains of the cheese market. They learn about the human body as they talk about the design of wheelchairs. They praise the inventiveness of patient organisations as they come to grips with the fact that, in clinical practice too, “the patient” is a collective. They find that in the hospital every “disease” is enacted (shaped, known, treated) in endless different ways. They link telephones to managerial power. They attune to the passions of amateurs, be it for music or heroin. They follow pig feed around the world to address the question what a boundary is. They talk about care for patients with Alzheimer’s as they suggest that it isn’t just scientists who invent and innovate what the real might be, but nurses and care assistants too. And they always try to surprise their readers. Their authors, so much is clear, were surprised by what they studied too. At the same time, ANT-texts *interfere*: in public debates, with political issues, in theoretical traditions. That is, in different contexts. But there is none of that bustling activity in your “association theory perspective”. What a pity.

All in all, it is quite clear that while you quote Latour you have not read any of the beautiful and gripping texts of the authors whom you call “... and colleagues” (and to whose work I extensively refer). Fair enough. One cannot read everything. There is too much, far too much, out there to read. Why burden yourself with all that work if you are only interested in Theory and you presume this to be coherent? Then one Master Theorist can say it all and everyone else just causes problems by introducing incoherence.

But, or so I ended up wondering, have you actually read *Latour*? I mean *read* – not as in submitting a text to your judgement, but as in trying to get a sense of what it seeks to achieve? Take that passage where you explain what (in actor network theory) an “actor” is. You write: “Hence, actors owe their status as actors not to intrinsic qualities, but to their location within the social space or, expressed in more up-to-date terms, certain practices of classification and ascription.” But listen: intrinsic qualities matter! Of course they do. It is just that they can never be fully known, or exhausted, since they only become visible “in action” (one quality or the other, never all, so that often such qualities, when they appear, are unexpected). And the space in which actors are located is not just *social*, it is *material* as well. And terms are not just either old fashioned or up-to-date, there are also contemporary clashes between vocabularies. (This is called debate.) And then, crucially, the ability of actors to act, does not merely depend on classification and ascription. It also depends on fuel or food, on their being pushed or paid, or on the voice, the muscles or the motor power of other actors. Mind you: an *actor network* is not quite the same thing as its predecessor, the *semiotic network*. It

does not consist of words alone. There is also metal in it; and bread; and music. There are elephants and waterfalls; viruses and microscopes; supermarkets and internets. There may be trains in a network or flesh. It is moving.

Let's face it: you do not just disregard "and colleagues". Your explanation of actors does not come close to "Latour" either.

I ended my original contribution by mentioning that "argument is war" but that luckily there are also less belligerent styles available for academic conversation. More curious, more open. And indeed, I would have preferred for us to talk in another format. Did you try? You didn't really, did you? Stronger still, the style that you choose (or that you take to be self-evident), was far worse than I had ever imagined. It did not suit the occasion at all. For rather than engaging in a debate, you went for the verdict, the instruction. Instead of giving arguments, you issued judgements. And as you did this you adopted the self-assured voice that claims to speak from somewhere above the crowd. You made it seem as if there were no embodied being involved with whom one might talk face to face, or exchange email messages or letters (as in "dear Georg Kneer").

Let me give an example: "Theories", you say, "aim not only to describe an individual case, but also to produce higher-level accounts and explanations". Now do they? Listen, such sentences phrase contested issues as if they were beyond dispute. They do authority, not conversation. What would you expect me to say in response? Try: imagine it. You see? Your choice of style left *me* with little choice. I had two options, really. I could meekly submit, or engage in verbal warfare. Easy. And as the referee says when the fight begins: *Let the best man win*. Our readers will take care of that.

Yours sincerely,  
Annemarie Mol

#### *Reference*

Latour, Bruno. 1988. *The pasteurization of France*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.