Actor Network Theory (and After) and Critical Management Studies: Contributions to the Politics of Organising

Autoria: Rafael Alcadipani, John Hassard

Abstract
In recent years the approach to social theory known as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has been adopted within a range of social science fields. In organisation studies, ANT has been part of a movement away from a functional emphasis on organisation as a discrete structural entity and towards the study of processes and practices of socio-technical organising. Despite its popularity, ANT is considered a controversial approach, not only for its insistence on the agency of non-humans, but also for promoting a sociological approach that appears to lack substantive political critique. This is specially related to a view that ANT does not offer tools to deliver an approach that de-naturalise, consider performativity and a reflexive approach to organisations. Drawing on the ‘further development’ (Law, 1999a) of ANT under what has become known as the ‘ANT and After’ literature (see Law and Hassard, 1999; Latour 2003; 2005b; 2007a,b; Law, 2007), as well as some of the principal characteristics of CMS (see Fournier and Grey, 2000; Grey and Willmott, 2002; Grey, 2007; Alvesson et. al., 2009), the paper assesses if ANT is really incapable of offering ideas and insights that may help to develop a critical perspective on management and organisations. We suggest ultimately that ANT can indeed be of value for developing a critical perspective on organisation(s) in the form of a political ontology of organising.

Introduction
Originating in studies of science, technology and society (STS), actor-network theory (ANT) - or the ‘sociology of translation’ (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1999b) - is an increasingly popular sociological method used within a range of social science fields. ANT gains much of its notoriety through advocating a socio-philosophical approach in which human and material factors are brought together in the same analytical view. In attempting to comprehend complex situations, ANT rejects any sundering of human and non-human, social and technical elements. In a much cited article, Michel Callon (1986) warns, for example, of the dangers of ‘changing register’ when we move from concerns with the social to those of the technical. The methodological philosophy is that all ingredients of socio-technical analysis be explained by common practices.

When we seek to translate an ANT approach into the sphere of Management and Organisational Studies (MOS), we are involved in the analysis of alliances or networks that “initiate and maintain the superordination of individuals or groups over others” (Grint 1991:149). We are thus reminded that many actors are locked into networks of which certain elements reside outside of the focal organisation. In addition, managerial networks are seen to take recourse, not just to the network of peer managers and control over material resources within the organisation, but also, for example, to the resources of the legal system and domestic sources of support, which are “invisibly meshed into the organisation’s disciplinary mechanisms” (Grint, 1991:149). As Latour (1987) demonstrated similarly in the field of STS, scientists physically isolated from the rest of the world in their search for knowledge are actually highly dependent upon a large array of supportive networks outside the laboratory.

The conceptual tools underlying the ANT approach enable us, therefore, to study the assembling and stabilization of diverse human and non-human entities within diffuse socio-material systems (Law, 1999a). For MOS the use of these tools has been part of a movement away from a functional emphasis on organisation as a discrete structural entity and towards the study of processes and practices of organising, and importantly socio-technical organising (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1999; Calas and Smircich, 1999; Hull, 1999; Lee and Hassard, 1999). ANT has been used by writers to examine a wide range of research issues within OS,
notably with regard to studies of information systems and information technology (see Bloomfield et al., 1992; Bloomfield and Vudubakis, 1994, 1999; Hine, 1995; Vidgen and McMaster, 1996).

Although ANT has been readily deployed in a number of sociological spheres, it has also been subject to severe criticism. Walsham (1997) for example argues that there are four main criticisms regularly directed at ANT; that it offers a limited analysis of social structures; neglects issues of political bias and morality; fails to conceptualise adequately the distinction between humans and nonhumans; and has problems in examining how to follow entities in the network analysis. In addition McLean and Hassard (2004) argue that ANT accounts have invited a range of controversies in respect to the inclusion/exclusion of actors and networks; role of social/technical privileging and status; distinction between agency and structure; and nature and role of heterogeneous engineering.

Despite the argument of the so-called ‘post-modern turn’ in MOS, that ANT has considerable analytical potential for the field (see e.g. Calas and Smircich, 1999), concerns such as the above begin to suggest the approach is problematic in terms of the insights it holds for the development of a critical analysis of management and organisations. For the critical analysis of organisations, Reed (1997) suggests that ANT is analytically under-powered in comparison to ‘traditional’ sociological perspectives based on ‘duality and dualisms’. Similarly Whittle and Spicer (2008:14) have urged scholars from the Critical Management Studies (CMS) movement to “resist translation by Actor Network Theory”, in an argument that suggests the positioning of ANT and CMS as analytical opponents.

Drawing on the ‘further development’ (Law, 1999a) of ANT under what has become known as the ‘ANT and After’ literature (see Law and Hassard, 1999; Latour 2003; 2005b; 2007a,b; Law, 2007), as well as some of the principal characteristics of CMS (see Fournier and Grey, 2000; Grey and Willmott, 2002; Grey, 2007; Alvesson et. al., 2009), the paper assesses if ANT is really incapable of offering ideas and insights that may help to develop a critical perspective on management and organisations. An important caveat to this task is that rather than a singular and clear cut object, ANT is a multiple approach with many different usages and interpretations (Brown and Capdevilla, 1999 – see also: Woolgar et. al., 2009). As a multiple object, it is performed differently while being deployed in specific research accounts (cf. Mol, 2009). Because of that, after discussing what is critical in MOS, we will characterize the ANT approach we espouse in this article to later access ANT (in)ability to provide a critical perspective for MOS. Drawing upon insights from the ANT and After literature, and in particular its handling of ‘ontological politics’, we suggest ultimately that ANT can indeed be of value for developing a critical perspective on organisation(s).

1. What is ‘Critical’ in Management and Organisational Studies?

Although elements of critical thought have been present in the social sciences since the work of anarchists (e.g. Mikhail Bakunin), utopian socialists (e.g. Henry de Saint-Simon) and communists (e.g. Karl Marx), it is in the past 40 years that ‘critical’ analysis in MOS has developed as a discernible institutionalized research movement (Adler et al. 2009). While the origins of such critical work lie mainly in Marxist approaches (e.g. Bendix, 1956; Braverman, 1974), subsequent critical thinking in MOS has incorporated postmodernist thought (e.g. Hassard and Parker, 1993; Calás and Smircich, 1999; Hassard et al, 2008). In this context, CMS has emerged as a movement that attempts to encompass a range of (critical) epistemological traditions, ranging from critical theory (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) to postcolonialist studies of management (Prasad, 2003), in the various academic specialities of the field (for an overview of CMS see Grey & Willmott, 2005; Adler et. al., 2007 and Alvesson et al, 2009). As such, it can be argued that CMS incorporates nowadays the majority of critical work in MOS.
Perspectives making CMS often reflect qualitatively different epistemological and ontological assumptions and it is no surprise that, in Adler’s (2002:388) words, “too few of us [in CMS] would ever be able to agree on anything much” (Adler, 2002: 388). Given CMS diversity, a common concern has been to discuss what counts as this type of academic work (e.g. Fournier and Grey, 2000; Adler et. al., 2007; Alvesson et. al., 2009). Parker (2002) proposes that when academics claim to be conducting critical work in MOS they tend to display a broadly left-wing/liberal political identity coupled with a suspicion of positivist methodology. Fundamentally, CMS does not find mainstream management to be either “intellectually coherent and/or ethically defensible” (Willmott, 1995: 36). As such, it seeks to challenge the authority and relevance of mainstream management thinking and practice as long as it tends to make “knowledge of management becomes knowledge for management and alternative voices are silenced or marginalized” (Alvesson et. al., 2009:6 – emphasis in the original). Some of the goals of CMS, therefore, are to: challenge the oppressive character of management and organisation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Adler, 2002), maintain a critical stance towards instrumental reason (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996), oppose dominant power, ideology, managerial privilege, and hierarchy (Adler et. al., 2007) and analyse relations between power and knowledge, especially to show how forms of knowledge that appear to be neutral, serve to reinforce asymmetrical relations of power (McKinlay and Starkey, 1998). In this way, CMS implies a negative posture against oppressive management and organisational practices at the same time it seeks to inspire (social) reform in the interest of those non-privileged, as well as emancipation and/or resistance from ideologies, institutions, and identities that tend to fix individuals into unreflectively reproduced ideas, intentions, and practices (Alvesson, 2008).

One of the most influential attempts to define the boundaries that make a work critical in MOS has been developed by Fournier and Grey (2000) (see also Grey and Willmott, 2005). They advocate that CMS organises itself around three core elements – ‘de-naturalisation’, ‘reflexivity’, and ‘(non) performative intent’. De-naturalization refers to “uncovering the alternatives that have been effaced by management knowledge and practice (...) CMS is concerned with the proposition that things may not be as they appear” (Fournier and Grey, 2000:18). As such, de-naturalization means not assuming management, its different elements and organisational realities as if they were given in the order of things. As a consequence, it implies that things could be different. Reflexivity relates to the fact that CMS involves intense reflexions about its epistemological, ontological and methodological stances. By doing that, it challenges the taken for granted objectivism and scientism usually present in mainstream positivist management research (Fournier and Grey, 2000:19). The (non) performative element refers to the avoidance to create knowledge which is driven by organisational and management usual instrumental, efficacy and efficiency exclusive concerns (Fournier and Grey, 2000:17).

Fournier and Grey (2000) discussion has been taken as a strong indication that CMS became obsessed with epistemological and ontological dilemmas with the consequence of ignoring the politics of the workplace (see Thompson, 2004). More precisely, for Thompson (2009) reflexivity about labour process and relativism in terms of knowledge claims are not appropriate ways of challenging managerialism in theory or practice. In addition, he argues that CMS tends to emphasise meta-theorizing whose focus in denaturalization and deconstruction problematize everything and resolve nothing (Thompson, 2009:106), making explicit a concern with a lack of critical engagement in ‘reality’. Similarly, CMS has also been criticized for moving away from engaging with organisational practices and participants (see Spicer et. al., 2009). More precisely, the (non) performative stance was understood as if CMS was advocating anti-performativity all together (cf. Spicer et. al., 2009).
In this context, the notion of critical performativity (CP) has emerged as a possible way of avoiding the problems of the supposed anti-performativity character of CMS at the same time that critique in MOS has been more concerned with practice (see Spicer & Bohm, 2007; Messner et al., 2008). A first step in suggesting CP was to broaden the notion of performativity itself. Fournier and Grey (2000:17) adopt a technical meaning (Alvesson et al., 2009) to this term (i.e. “to subordinate knowledge and truth to the production of efficiency”) while the CP notion takes performativity as signifying intervention in practice (Spicer et al., 2009:543).

CP, then, “involves active and subversive intervention into management discourses and practices” (Spicer et al., 2009:538) with an aim of moving CMS beyond ‘cynicism’ by recognising that critique involves an affirmative movement together with the negative predominance in CMS today (Spicer et al., 2009). For Alvesson et al. (2009:23) CP is underscored by an understanding that critique can involve a positive impulse alongside its reflexive and deconstructive movement in order to avoid becoming only negative and, as such, marginalized within the academic world. To favour CP, five elements have been identified, i.e.: affirmative stance, ethic of care, pragmatic orientation, attending to potentialities and normative orientation (see Spicer et al., 2009).

Having explored some key characteristics of CMS, we will discuss next notions associated with the ANT version we espouse in this paper in order to explore later whether this approach can contribute towards a ‘critical’ analysis of organisation(s).

2. ANT and After: Bringing Politics Back in

ANT suggests that things take form and acquire attributes as a consequence of their relations with others (Law, 1994, 1999a, 1999b). Law (2002) argues that, whilst entities, in their broadest sense, are usually conceived of as having stability and uniqueness, ANT, in contrast, advocates that they are essentially a result achieved when different heterogeneous elements are continually assembled together (see also Callon, 1986; Law, 1999a). As ANT regards entities as produced in relations, and applies this ruthlessly to materials, it can be thus understood as a ‘semiotics of materiality’ (Law, 1999a:3). In this way, a central feature of ANT is to attempt to explain how ‘ordering effects’ from devices (e.g. Law, 1988) to organisations (e.g. Law, 1994) are performed into being. In fact, although the ‘T’ of the ANT acronym stands for ‘Theory’, it is better understood as a methodological approach (see Law, 2004, 2007; Latour, 2005c). In this way, ANT can be seen as an approach to the field that offers analytical tools that can be applied to ‘narrative’ knowledge, be them organisational or not (cf. Czarniawska, 2009:156).

Despite early ANT works have been developed with the aim of exploring explicitly or implicitly dynamics of power (e.g. Callon and Latour, 1981; Callon and Law, 1982; Law, 1986; Latour, 1987 - see also Clegg, 1999; Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005), it has been accused of not being interested in power, considered as a political neutral approach (see Amsterdamska, 1999; Ausch, 2000; Star, 1991; Haraway, 1992) and also telling its stories taking only the manager, the entrepreneur and the scientist point of view, something that leads to a managerial bias (Star and Griesemer, 1989: 390). Its critics also claim that ANT is inappropriate to develop a critical analysis of organisation (see Reed, 1997; Whittle and Spicer, 2008) mainly because ANT is thought to be unable to deliver a reflexive, non-performative and de-naturalised approach to MOS (see Whittle and Spicer, 2008). Consequently, it also seems incapable of informing critical performativity in MOS.

This supposed lack of political engagement has, however, been addressed by some of ANT’s main proponents. Law (1991) suggested that accepting ‘epistemological relativism’ does not imply ‘political relativism’. As such, the consequences of ordering effects must be understood in terms of inclusions and exclusions that are created as well as their effects. For Law (1997b) politics is about hierarchical distributions in terms of how orderings create specific inclusions
and exclusions which are performed in a heterogeneous way. Using colonialism as an example, Law (1997b) argues that as this is not a single system it tends to make it a much stronger distribution, implying that forms of domination are always performed multifariously by different sets of relations. Elsewhere, Law (1999a) suggests that asymmetries can be created inside the network building process, and argues that the possibility of exerting control relies on the central location one entity might have in a materially heterogeneous network - one that brings information from the periphery to the centre, thus enabling ‘action’ (see also: Law 1986, 1999b; Latour, 1987).

Despite the mentioned initiatives in discussing the approach politics, perhaps the place where attempts to establish a clear ANT position on this issue is most robustly made is in the literature popularly known as ‘ANT and After’vi. In addition to issues of politics, this literature tackled the question of ANT’s tendency to analyse ordering ‘simplistically’, with the consequence of potentially ‘naturalising’ orderings and following a ‘managerial’ stance (see Law and Hassard, 1999).

As a way of dealing with the ANT’s ‘problems’, works in ANT and After attempted to emphasise even more of a relational stance. This was achieved by challenging, more explicitly, traditional forms of representation. Latour (1999c), for example, argued that representation is usually thought to be established by using words to express the ‘real’. This, however, assumes reality as being ‘out there’ and entities as essences that exist discretely in the order of things. Contrary to how representation tends to be addressed, Latour (1999c) states that things are always constructed into being, rather than existing ‘out there’, independently, or being the product of exclusively human interpretation. Latour (2002; 2005c) thus wishes to reframe the idea of construction in social science. To argue that a fact is constructed usually is to say that it is not real (i.e. socially constructed), whilst in other sciences and also in common-sense to stress that something has been constructed is to argue that it has a modest and visible origin. One of the advantages of following the construction process is that it is possible to investigate how connections between heterogeneous elements get established, how associations are made and unmade, how different elements inter-associate with each other and how assemblages and facts emerge as outcomes of such processes. In addition, thinking about construction in terms of common sense allows us to consider that things could fail or be otherwise which can be related to a ‘political’ concern (Latour, 2005c).

For Mol (2002), entities are enactedvii and performed into being through materially heterogeneous practices. By foregrounding practices, this notion helps us to go beyond traditional forms of representation, reinforcing the claim that nothing exists autonomously without relations that sustain entities, which is a clear stance against naturalizing ordering or viewing it in a simplistic way. Furthermore, ANT and After argue that realities are enacted in the process of knowing (see Law, 2004; Law and Urry, 2004; Law and Singleton, 2005). For Law (2007:15) rather than simply ‘describing’, different narratives ‘enact’ realities and thus a “version of the better and the worse, the right and the wrong, the appealing and the unappealing”. As Law (2007:15) continues “There is no innocence. The good is being done as well as the epistemological and the ontological”. For ANT and After accounts, therefore, are not only political (Law and Urry, 2004; Law, 2004a; 2007), they are also about being ontologically political (Mol, 1999, 2002; Law, 2004b; Law and Urry, 2004). One result of thinking in ontologically political terms is that “every time we make reality claims in science we are helping to make some social reality more or less real” (Law and Urry, 2004: 396). For instance, much of what is usually taken as ‘natural’ male/female characteristics which help to justify different forms of sexism is in essence the outcome of particular ways of performing medical research. In other words, gender ‘natural’ discrepancies are enacted by specific medical practices which perform woman and man as having essential differences while
alternative ways of carrying out medical research would make such dichotomy much less ‘natural’ (see Mol, 1999).

Combining ontology with politics suggests that “the condition of possibilities are not given” (Mol, 1999:74), but are in the making. Thus, realities are not immutable - they are shaped, enacted, opened and contested. Ontological politics is connected with the way in which the real is implicated in the political and vice versa, meaning that things could always be otherwise (Mol, 1999; Law, 2008). Thus, the notion of ontological politics is based on the concept that things might be ‘otherwise’, or that some versions are ‘better’ than others. For instance, Law and Mol (2008) argue that the practice of boiling pigswill, a practice related to feeding pigs in the UK, created less harm to the environment and to Third World countries than its alternative (i.e. giving soy to pigs) which emerged as a consequence of the foot and mouth disease in the island (Law and Mol, 2008:141-2)

By questioning traditional forms of representation, ANT and After has also challenged conventional politics. A key assumption of political representation is the need to be ‘faithful’ (Latour, 2005b) and thus to consider entities and events as absolute truths or untruths (Latour, 2003; 2004a,c; 2005b). As such, political decisions are assumed to be taken on the basis of ‘facts’ presented as unambiguous. As ANT does not assume entities to be discrete, singular and unproblematic, then any traditional notion of politics ‘can only fail’ (Latour, 2004b: 215).

When exploring problematic political issues through this approach, Latour (2005a) has used the term ‘Thing’ to refer etymologically to matters at the heart of an assembly in which discussion requires judgement to be reached in common, and through the designation of an archaic agora. Hence, within ANT and After, politics is about Things - it is about controversies surrounding existence and the denial of singularity in favour of multiplicity. Politics is, thus, not limited to how it has usually been understood - it is not exclusively about ‘giving voice’ (Latour, 2005a; 2007a,b,c) - but can also be based, for instance, on how laboratory assemblies enact objects and give voice to them. The point here is to try to compare different techniques of re-presentation by arguing that there are many different ways of doing politics than are usually considered (Latour, 2007b). Thus, rather than being an essence, procedure or domain of life, politics is something that ‘moves’, it ‘turns around a topic’ and can only exist when there is an active issue (Latour, 2007c).

This political project argues that it is necessary to readdress the way that entities are analysed - i.e. to examine assemblages of heterogeneous elements, rather than to account solely for singularity, human and social aspects. This involves developing a ‘cosmopolitics’ (a term borrowed from Isabelle Stengers: see Stengers, 1997). The idea of cosmos is literally to encompass every-'Thing’ in political accounts. It involves a double injunction which is to engage in a form of ontological politics and to allow all kinds of ‘others’ object to the stories that are being told. This approach has “the burning desire to have the new entities detected, welcomed and given a shelter” (Latour, 2005c: 224).

Although we can identify differences between ontological politics and cosmopolitics more important perhaps are the important similarities in their propositions. Overall, ANT and After’s politics concern how realities are enacted into being and how different entities can be constructed - they highlight that things could be ‘otherwise’ and that realities are not ‘destiny’ (Law, 2007). Such a politics tries to make explicit how positive and negative realities or articulations are constructed within all sorts of practices and arenas. Describing is, thus, about performing ‘good or bad’, although, rather than being treated in isolation, good and bad are interwoven or ‘partially connected’ (Strathern, 1991, Law 2004). As such, ANT and After appears to have given political issues greater consideration through concern with understanding the consequences associated with the ‘performance of realties’ (Law, 2004). It appears, also, to shy away from assuming the ‘stabilisation of relations’, trying instead to place in the foreground all controversies associated with what is usually regarded as facts, as
well as to open the political notion to encompass other forms of disputes that are usually left aside from traditional forms of politics. In this way, it clearly challenges espoused denaturalization.

Within this section we have discussed fundamental elements of the ANT version we espouse in this article with the aim of disputing the idea that this approach is apolitical. In fact, ANT and After seems to substantially bring politics back to the approach. To indicate that ANT and After deals with politics is not to argue that it can be deployed to inform a critical approach in MOS. Thus, in the next section we will discuss if ANT can act as an analytical resource to CMS (cf. Alvesson et. al., 2009:15).

3. Towards a Politics of Organising

ANT insights and developments are mostly originated from empirical investigation (Latour, 1988a; 1988b; 2004b; Law, 1986; Mol, 2002) and this approach is specifically rooted in the analysis of organisations (e.g. Law, 1994; Mol, 2002), even though it is not meant to be part of Organisation Studies in a strict sense, something that, interestingly enough, has contributed to this perspective usefulness for MOS (cf. Czarniawska, 2009: 155). The various ANT works based on organisations imply that such entities are perceived as continuous and unfinished, precarious and partial - a permanent process that generates more or less stable effects; a heterogeneous emergent phenomenon; a verb (Cooper and Law, 1995). Analysing organisation(s) in this form - stressing that the noun ‘organisation’ can only exist as a continuous result of organising - challenges what mainstream MOS approaches usually accept as given or taken-for-granted (Cooper and Law, 1995; Knox et. al., 2007). As such, ANT can be seen as a strong ally from moving the focus of MOS from (formal) organisations to organizing (cf. Czarniwska, 2009:158).

Thus, analysing organising via ANT is to attempt to address by which means a diffuse and complex system, composed of humans and nonhumans ‘becomes networked’ (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1999). Organisations are outcomes and products of continuing process - relations and practices that are materially complex and whose ordering can only be addressed, locally and empirically, as ‘in the making’ (see Law, 1994; Cooper and Law, 1995). The approach implies that organisations and their components are effects generated in multiple interactions, rather than existing merely in the order of things (Latour, 1987, 2005b; Law, 1992, 1999b).

For instance, one of the authors of this paper did an in-depth empirical research in one of the largest newspaper printing sites in the UK. Following this approach, rather than a printing site that has stable and fixed characteristics which exist in the order of things, during the research was possible to access how the newspaper factory is constantly enacted by the articulation of as diverse elements and practices as press operatives working in machines trying ‘to get the paper out of the door’, paper reels being replaced, ink being distributed, budgets being made, actions of maintenance crews, discussions around production reports, gathering of market data, application of Health & Safety procedures, interactions between union representatives and managers, all sorts of meetings, emotions, feelings, etc. In fact, the printing site is produced in a multiple way every time its events are performed. This indicates that the printing site is made out of multiplicity and its appearance of being ‘the same printing site’ relies in various practices, actions and performances that although differ from one occasion to another, also maintain a sense of similarity.

The enactment of different practices making the factory supports each other in some events, while in others they clash. For instance, sometimes the way production reports are filled by press operatives and maintenance personnel do not raise any dispute while in other occasions serious controversies emerge about which department is accounted for a specific press fault or to sort a press problem out. Furthermore, within the factory there were various disputes (i.e. related to how press crews would be staffed, payment of overtime work, when newspaper
presses should be cleaned, etc.) between management and workers. Such disputes, which help to perform the factory, are enacted by spreadsheets, numbers, emotions, charts, practices of human resources, memories of how things used to work, industrial relations, workers feelings and intentions, practices of press work, meetings, unions, managers, the managing director (MD) views, etc.

Each of these entities and/or practices is also complexly enacted into being. For example, the possibility of being a corporate MD is partially given by the conditions of those who occupy a central position from which they can have privileged access to, for example, software, databases, spreadsheets etc (see Law, 1999b). The disputes between workers and managers with the manager’s point of view prevalence, quite common nowadays in the factory, were impossible until the early 1980s when management played no role whatsoever in managing newspaper shop-floor workers, duty which was performed by the Chapel[xi], a self-governed structure whose main aim was to guarantee the printers’ interest (Thompson, 1957; Sykes, 1960). Such disputes (or the lack of them) are enacted by the diverse interactions of complex elements and practices, ranging from modes of performing industrial relations to the imposition of a neoliberal agenda aiming to reduce the trade union power in the UK. In this way, there is nothing inevitable and natural about the printing site. It can only exist if various entities, be humans or nonhumans, and practices are enacting that organisation into being at every specific moment in a continuous process of organising. In addition, as the Chapel example shows, things can always be different even the almost universally acceptable management role of deciding staffing related issues.

Following what we discussed above, de-naturalisation, a key element of critical approaches to MOS, relates to the view that management; its different elements and organisational realities are not given in the order of things and, as such, could be different. Taken the newspaper factory example, we suggest how ANT and After insights may help to put organising in the foreground with the consequence of indicating that, paraphrasing Law (2007:16), management and organisational realities are not destiny, a key insight from ANT and After politics and an assumption of CMS as implied in the first section. As such, to analyse organising rather than organisation is not just a methodological stance, it is also a political gesture. ANT, thus, can help to strengthen a posture in which “organisations have never explained anything; organisations have to be explained” (Czarniawska, 2006: 1557), a position that at the same time is political and help on de-naturalising organisations and management.

However, it could be argued that ANT capacity to help on de-naturalising organisations is an insufficient condition of making this approach valuable for a critique of MOS if it does not help on delivering CP. To take organisation(s) as complex gatherings of multiple elements and practices opens up the possibility of making positive changes into particular organisational processes[xii] (Spicer et. al., 2009:550) which is a key element underscoring the possibility of delivering CP (see Spicer et. al., 2009). Similarly, for ANT and After politics, in order to politically modify a state of affairs it is necessary to take cognisance that forces are made of different ties upon which resistance can apply. If domination, exclusion, power, etc. are to be analysed and challenged, it is necessary to understand how they get constructed in order to create effects (Latour, 2004c). For Latour (2005c), political relevance is related to registering as many associations as possible. This is why, for Latour (1999c; 2004c; 2005c), the ANT approach is also a political project.

Some empirical work drawing in ANT and After politics have analysed how such insights can help on performing interventions in practice, a defining characteristic of CP as noted above. For instance, Hinchliffe et. al. (2005) discuss a dispute about the proposed location of a new construction development in Birmingham, U.K. which would have negative environmental and community consequences. They studied how the presence of water voles (a species under
threat in the British Isles) in the area could prevent the development taking place, as it is unlawful to destroy the habitats of endangered species. Hinchliffe et al. (2005) detail a series of controversies surrounding the detection of the presence of water voles in the location. Their work analyses how, by engaging with factual characteristics of water voles - e.g. they do not live in the same places as rats, their prints are far different than usually assumed, etc. - in trying to account for their existence, such creatures were ‘performed into being’ by local ecologists’ practices. In so doing, taking such entities as essentially complex, an insight from cosmopolitics, extended the possibilities of associated political action. Contributing to ANT and After, Routledge (2008) analyses his experiences as a militant in the organisation People’s Global Action to defend ‘critical engagement’, a notion which takes intervention as a core element as much as CP, in order to make sense of his actions on helping to construct this particular actor-network. Through his analysis, it is possible to grasp how actor-networks rely on inequalities of power, biases and modes of operation as well as how engaging with practical intervention is a complex process.

Given the complexities of practical interference, a relevant question to ANT and After politics is whether there are ‘real options’ (Mol, 1999) available and if so how options should be chosen. This question is also an assumption present in the CP intension of fostering intervention in practice. However, asking if it is possible to choose among options is underlined by a view that instead of being ‘multiple’, objects and realities are ‘plural’xiii, with it being possible to enact one rather than another. Mol (1999) suggests that while on some occasions different realities may include each other, on other occasions they might clash. Thus, multiplicity is not about pluralism – i.e. about separate entities that stand apart in homogeneous fields - but it suggests instead that the various versions performed have relations between them; i.e. they may be opposed, but they may also be complementary. Alternative realities might be found, but one might interfere with another. To separate them, however, as if they were plural, is to bypass and ignore the complex interconnections between them. Thus achieving rational choice in terms of political desirability is neither easy nor straightforward (Mol, 1999). To such a view there is no general or total solution – ANT and After politics can only be taken into account in local empirical settings (Mol, 2002; Law, 2007). To seek local and specific ‘solutions’ rather than total ones is a aim of some versions of CMS (see Adler et. al., 2007; Alvesson et. al., 2009; Spicer et. al., 2009).

In this way, an important element of ANT and After political ‘critical engagement’ (cf. Routledge, 2008) is to defend, after empirical examination of specific settings, particular practices as ‘more favourable’ than others, for example, in education (Varren, 1999), Health Care (Mol, 2008) and animal feeding (Law and Mol, 2008). This is so because there are multiple realities which can be played off against one another, even thought this is a complex issue as noted above and it also indicates that there is no general solution (Law, 2008:637). For Haraway (2008) the question in terms of intervention is how to interfere in particular realities within particular locations in order to generate less negative alternatives, how to strengthen realities that otherwise would be fragile. In terms of the newspaper factory example presented before, we argued that the factory is being multifariously produced xiv which means that rather than a totalising system, it is made out of difference and complexities. This implies that specific practices could be ‘better’ than others. While the research in the printing site was being performed, 4 out of its 9 newspaper printing presses were being replaced by state of art brand new machines. However, the practices of printing inscribed (cf. Latour and Veen, 2002) by the new presses constrained the possibilities of workers to use printing skills they have learnt and deployed for almost 15 years. Such new printing machines were also dependent on a new electronic paper reel distribution and preparation system which helped to make some staff redundant. In the other hand, the printing practices required in the new machines tend to put workers under less risk of accidents and to
create less paper, water and energy wastage. Thus, printing practices in the old equipment were more favourable to keep employment and have workers exerting their abilities than the new ones at the same time that the new machines operating way put workers under less risk of physical harm and has less environmental impact.

To argue such a thing can be seen as not ‘real intervention’ and, thus, to not help on delivering CP, as long as it is considered that these arguments are restricted to the academic ‘ivory tower’. However, ANT and After takes that there is no reality outside relations and that realities are thus constructed within the process of knowing. In such a view, there is not a priori a researcher/object dichotomy - both are produced as outcomes of the practices of research (Law, 1997) and the researcher, therefore, is not just observing, s/he is actively constructing what it is being studied. For instance, during the newspaper research the academic had the opportunity to actively question managers, workers and trade unions officials about their practices, some of which were rather problematic. These questions open up the possibility for thinking. In a specific event, showing discomfort to racist remarks was instrumental in making this behaviour to be challenged in a group of individuals. Yet again, this does not offer general solution to the world of management and organisations, but engagement with specific practices located in empirical settings – a key objective of CP (Spicer et al., 2009).

Besides that, for ANT and After politics rather than simply ‘describing’, accounts ‘enact’ realities into being. In this way, when preferable practices are highlighted, they are given credit and, thus, can become stronger (cf. Harraway, 2008). Analogously, when the same happens to problematic practices, they may become weaker. As such, by performing accounts that show how “features of contemporary society, such as the profit imperative, patriarchy, racial inequality, and ecological irresponsibility often turn organisations into instruments of domination and exploitation” and discussing alternatives for management and organisations, critical work in MOS may be helping to undermine dominant and pejorative practices or, at least, helping to enact them in specific places where they can be challenged, something that is especially important when CMS work is used in teaching students at different levels, some of whom never came across such realities. Also, in terms of performativity, from what we have discussed so far, ANT does not seem to foster MOS knowledge that helps to improve organisational efficacy and efficiency or to maximize organisational output. As such, it does not deliver technical performativity. The performatative character of ANT may help to indicate that performativity is not only related to instrumentality and/or intervention, as it has been taken in CMS, it is also about how accounts help to enact specific realities rather than others. So far we have discussed that ANT can inform accounts that seek to de-naturalise and (critically) engage with management and organisations. The approach, thus, seems to be capable of fostering de-naturalisation and CP, at the same time it does not create instrumental knowledge about management and organisations. However, criticism has also been directed against what some suggest is ANT’s problematic epistemology. Whittle and Spicer (2008), in particular, argue that ANT’s epistemology fails to provide a thoroughly reflexive theory of knowledge. The main problems are that it “relies on the assumption that social life can be observed objectively by scientists using esoteric concepts”, can be “understood through a process of scientific verification” and can be “explained without a reflexive examination of the philosophical and political assumptions that accompany the researcher” (Whittle and Spicer. 2008: 9). As a result, the charge is that ANT tends to “impose its own theoretical lexicon, attempts to verify and generalise a linear model and engages in a limited reflexivity about its own true claims” (Whittle and Spicer, 2008: 10).

In light of ANT and After, however, it is possible to question such strong epistemological criticisms of ANT. The above critics take ANT as a singular whole and thus tend to disregard the nature of difference presented in various ANT versions (see above). Moreover, as noted,
ANT and After makes explicit that realities are constructed within the process of knowing (see Latour, 1999; 2004a; 2005b Mol, 2002; Law, 2004) and for the approach there is not a priori a researcher/object dichotomy - both are produced as outcomes of the practices of research. Hence, the researcher too is a product of research practices – s/he does not possess total command of the research process and knowledge generation. As such, it can be misleading to suggest that ANT assumes there is an external reality that can be observed by a conscious researcher, even though some early studies might be suggestive of such a position (see Callon, 1986). Hence, the researcher too is a product of research practices – s/he does not possess total command of the research process and knowledge generation. Moreover, by highlighting the role of accounts in the production of realities, ANT and After shows that knowledge is also political. Furthermore, by helping to challenge the MOS mainstream assumed ontology of organisations, ANT and After offers “materials for comparison and critical reflection, from both theoretical and methodological points of view” (cf. Czarniawska, 2009: 155). The approach, then, seems capable to delivering reflexivity for MOS. This section has addressed how by bringing politics back to the approach, versions of ANT and After seem to help on producing MOS accounts which are capable of delivering de-naturalisation, reflexivity, being non-technical performative at the same time that helps in achieving CP. As such, ANT and After seem to being able to act as an analytical resource to CMS (cf. Alvesson et. al., 2009:15) by offering the possibility of helping to develop a politics of organising.

Conclusions
Drawing on the ‘ANT and After’ literature, as well as what are usually considered key characteristics of CMS, this paper has examined whether ANT is capable of offering insights for developing a critical perspective on organisation(s). It argued that political insights from the ANT and After literature are relevant to making explicit the performance of, for example, profit imperatives, patriarchy, racial inequality, and ecological irresponsibility, as well as bundles of relations and associations that assist in enacting organisations as instruments of domination. In such a view, exploitation, racism, patriarchalism, etc. do not in themselves explain anything – they are what precisely have to be explained (see Latour, 2004b; 2005c). Thus, whereas on the one hand, ANT, via a rejection of positivist assumptions and means-ends rationalities, has the potential to be used in ways that recognise that ordering is not inevitable and ‘could be otherwise’, on the other, CMS insights can enrich ANT, as they call attention to issues that have been frequently neglected by those applying the approach. Different from traditional modernist modes of critique, by defending an engagement with practices in specific settings and contexts, ANT may help to develop a type of MOS critique which does not assume an already made repertory of how things are and how they should work. What ANT and After seems to offer is to underscore the politics inherent to organising. ANT and After can make us to consider that rather than being treated in isolation, good and bad are interwoven and we can help to strengthen the first and to undermine the latter. By proposing to analyse organising in practices, it does not impose a general solution, but highlights that the ‘good’ can only be made locally and empirically. The issue, then, is not to avoid translation by ANT (see Whittle and Spicer, 2008), but to produce ANT accounts that help us develop a critical theory of organisations in a form of a political ontology of organising.

References


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1 It is important to note that CMS has been accused of excluding other critical voices in the field (see Ackroyd, 2004; Bohm and Spoeistra, 2004; Wray-Bliss, 2004)

2 Various debates have taken place, for example, over: the nature of critique in CMS (e.g. Jermier and Clegg, 1994; Boje et al, 2001; Hassard et. al., 2001), whether CMS aims to produce more ‘human’ and ethical management practices or is against management altogether (e.g. Parker, 2002; Adler et.al., 2007), to mention but a few.

3 For a defence from the accusation that CMS has advocated an anti-performative stance see Alvesson et. al. (2009).

4 For Spicer et. al. (2009:541-543) anti-performativity is rather problematic as it conflicts with attempts to promote social change and to engage with practitioners and mainstream management; inflicts CMS to have a consistently negative position making it unable to claim what it desires; makes CMS to be trapped and dependent on what it critiques and is contradictory to the fact that CMS research is produced with performative goals such as academics aim of growing in the academic career through publication, Moreover, in order “to do its business” relies on a series of performativities within society (e.g. flights being affordable and on schedule, conference hotels hosting conferences efficiently, publishers pay copyrights expediently, etc.).
The roots of ANT can also be traced back to the works of Michel Serres, Algirdas Greimas, Isabelle Stengers, Gabriel Tarde, Harold Garfinkel (for some insights on some of those influences see Brown and Capdevila, 1999; Latour, 2001a; 2005c; McLean and Quatrotone, 2005; Law, 2007). Michel Foucault is also a source of inspiration, but ANT theorists have tried to make clear the difference between their work and his (see Law, 1992; 1994; 1999 and Mol, 2003).

This being the title of both a ‘summit’ conference held at Keele University (U.K.) in 1997 (to explore problematic issues in ANT, and attended by notables such as Michel Callon, Donna Haroway, Bruno Latour, John Law, Annemarie Mol, and Marilyn Strathern, among many others) as well as an edited book based on selected papers from that conference (see Law and Hassard, 1999)

Law (2002: 159) suggests that enactment means “the claim that relations, and so, realities … are being endlessly or chronically brought into being in a continuous process of production and reproduction, and have no status, standing, or reality outside those processes”


We draw this argument from Latour (2005) who draws on Tarde (1999) to argue that entities have to differ, or become further articulated, in order to exist as long as existence relies on repetition through difference (see Latour, 2001; 2005c; 2009; Czarniawska, 2004; McLean and Quattrone, 2006). Although for Tarde repetition is a key process to understanding societies, rather than seeing repetition as a simple mechanical copy, it is perceived as an adaptation of one idea or action. As a result, every adaptation is different from the next - repetition implies difference and therefore transformation (Czarniawska, 2004).

This is the name given to the unit of the Trade-Union (TU) organisation at the workshop level. This term origin is associated with the fact that printing was first developed at Monasteries and Churches. That is why the head of TU representatives in the shop floor is called as Father of the Chapel (FOC). For a detailed examination of the chapels’ functions see: Sykes, 1960.

To talk about the possibility of CP, Spicer et. al. (2009:550) draws on Bruno Latour insight, even thou Whittle and Spicer (2008) argues that ANT cannot deliver a critical perspective in MOS.

To argue that even the same entity is multifariously enacted by a different set of practices - that it is done differently, that it is ordered differently - is not to say that there are various singular versions which compose a plural entity. Neither is it to say that there is one entity that is subjected to multiple interpretations depending on which social group perceives it. To stress the latter is to follow a ‘perspectivist’ view (Mol, 1999), suggesting that different individuals have, with their specific social backgrounds, to look to the same ordered effect from different standpoints and, as a result, consider it differently. This highlights the diversity of views available when expanding perspectives for examining the same entity. In most cases, such differing perspectives are mutually exclusive, discrete, and exist side by side, whilst keeping the object itself ‘untouched’ (Law, 2002; Mol, 2002), thus being regarded as singular, as one. As a result, it leaves aside the multiplicity of enactments and their interrelations. Following insights from the ANT and After literature, difference, then, is not a matter of perspectives on a single object, but the performance of different objects in different sets of relations. To avoid ‘perspectivism’ this approach proposes to foreground practices, events, and the nature of materiality. As Law (2002:59) points out “if we are interested in multiplicity then we also need to attend to the craftwork implied in practice … realities are not explained by practices and beliefs but are instead produced in them” (emphasis in original). Thus, talking about multiplicity in practice demands empirical examination (see Latour, 1999c; Mol, 2002).

Law (1997b) makes a slimier point discussing colonialism. He argues that as this is not a single system it tends to make it a much stronger distribution, implying that forms of domination are always performed multifariously by different sets of relations.

That is the CMS division mission statement of the Academy of Management.

For a discussion on how ontological politics can be used ‘to make a difference’ in management education, see Hitchin and Maksymiw (2009).