

Beyond Actor Network Theory to the Marriage of Moments

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ABSTRACT

In 2004, the Government of Jamaica and the Confederation of Trade Unions signed a social partnership agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which maintained the size of the public sector and wage expenditure, in exchange for no redundancies. The implementation of the Agreement unearthed unanticipated implications for the practice of power within the partnership. The ontology of Actor Network Theory, conceptualizes the MoU as an actor which, through the mechanics of translation, creates its own actor network that it seeks to inscribe with its own discourse to attain a 'black box' status. The inclusion of discourse as a moment and use of Critical Discourse Analysis provides for the penetration of the impenetrable black box of network interaction and analytical possibilities. The paper argues for the recognition of discourse as a moment in ANT which strengthens it and affords a mode of analysis to deconstruct or explore inner distributions of power.

KEYWORDS

Actor Network, Black Box, Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse, Moment, Social Partnership

INTRODUCTION

This article introduces a theoretical exploration and an analytical viewpoint which contributes to and allows for the refreshing of the 'old' Actor Network Theory, through the lens of the "contemporary", namely Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

ANT is presented as a systematic way to explain the mechanics and dynamics of the interactions within networks derived from the context of studying phenomenon such as social partnerships, namely the bipartite agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) brokered between the Government of Jamaica and the Public Sector Trade Unions in 2004-2006.

Using ANT's ontology and uniqueness in the analysis of diverse phenomena in concert with CDA methodologies in social enquiry, alternative perspectives, new analytical dimensions and modalities of knowledge building comes to the fore. With this combination of ANT and CDA, some of the criticisms of ANT levelled from the literature are tempered - yielding other ways and distilling new views of social phenomenon.

Further, the inclusion of 'discourse' as a moment in the actor-network, facilitates the penetration of the impenetrable 'black box' of network interaction, capturing, deconstructing and also explaining the nature of the linkages and precariousness within it. New insight is facilitated into the consistency of the linkages and connectivities of power and of the inner struggle between discourses- traditional public sector discourse and practice and the new MOU discourse being introduced, which seeks supremacy within the black box of the actor network.

The first section reviews ANT's theoretical framework and a synopsis of the bipartite agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) brokered between the Government of Jamaica and the

Public Sector Trade Unions in 2004-2006. The second, focuses on methodological issues and the third section utilizes ANT's mechanics through the lens of the "sociology of translation" to explain the development of the MOU actor network of relations. Within ANT's ontological framework, the MOU Agreement becomes an actor and acquires its own actor network emerging from the contentious arena of negotiation, demonstrating ANT's utility as a construct and its appropriateness as a tool to understand and explore agreements.

The fourth section summarizes the limitations of ANT and discusses how the inclusion of the 'discourse moment' in ANT translation provides the opportunity for these to be mitigated and opens up numerous possibilities for social inquiry.

ACTOR NETWORK THEORY (ANT) AND THE MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT (MOU)

In terms of context, the signing of a social partnership agreement or MOU by the Government of Jamaica and the Public Sector Trade Unions in 2004 occurred against the background of dire fiscal and macroeconomic challenges. The Ministry of Finance and Planning (MOFP) in response to these circumstances, issued an advisory which capped the filling of vacant posts, as well as the creation, reclassification and upgrading of existing posts within the public sector.

The objective was to reduce any additional public sector salary related expenditures in the budget. However, the Jamaica Confederation of Trade Unions (JCTU) took umbrage to this unilateral decision by the Government, which triggered a series of meetings and negotiations leading to terms, represented in the text of the 'Public Sector Memorandum of Understanding', which was coined the "MoU".

The major *quid pro quo* between the Government and the JCTU was the maintenance of the current size and cost of public sector wage expenditure in exchange for not making 15,000 workers redundant. The MoU was applicable to the entire public sector and provided the Government with a 'breathing space' to address issues surrounding the macro economy.

Social partnership emerged in part, as a form of governance, reflecting a broadened governance capacity incorporating relatively autonomous institutions, networks and actors (Jessop, 2004; Kooiman, 2000; Rhodes, 1997) into the political system to enhance the governability of the political system as a whole.

ACTOR NETWORK THEORY

Actor Network Theory arises from the work of Bruno Latour, (1987; 1996; 1999), Michel Callon (1986) and John Law (1987; 1991; 1993) that views the world as consisting of networks of relations (Law, 1999, p.74). The networks of relations in ANT are unique in that they consist of both human and non-human actors (Ritzer, 2006) that are considered equal, and as such, possess 'symmetry.' Being a distinctive approach to social theory and research (Law, 2007, p.6) 'actor networks' is a founding concept of ANT, used to explore the mechanics of social relations, how they are created, held and disintegrate.

An actor network (Callon, 1993) is conceptualized as a group of unspecified relationships with an undetermined nature, composed of animate and inanimate, heterogeneous elements (Callon, 1987; Law, 1991; Watson, 2007; Hunter & Swan, 2007), linked in limited time and space. The heterogeneous networks created, have relations and interactions that are both material, involving people, ideas and technologies, the latter being hybrids of the social technical and personal (Latour, 1993; Williams-Jones & Graham, 2003).

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