Putting ANT into practice: on the integration of actor-network-theory and practice theory – or, how to blur boundaries

The proclaimed practice turn refers to the pivotal function of actions and interactions within practices. They allow us to focus neither exclusively on individual minds and actions nor on social structures and systems only, but on the things which are done and said, no matter on what level. This entails two further aspects to be taken into consideration: the embodiment of practical understanding and skill, and on the other hand (by varying degree) the materiality which enables, constitutes or restrains possible actions.

Thus practice theory brings material arrangements (Schatzki 2003: 195) into play, through which practices can transpire, meaning human activities – organized by a non-individual objective mind – are meshed with and molded by artefacts, organisms and things. In praxeological approaches these non-human entities are recognized in an asymmetric understanding, i.e. they are used or handled. They are not considered as being active parts of a practice, more as a taken-for-granted fragment of the frame or the site in which practices are carried out.

When speaking of non-human entities a corpus of work comes up which has extensively dealt with how technologies arise (or not) and how non-humans not only contribute to and shape human action, but enact and are being enacted by close interactions with humans, in specific inscribed ways (Akrich 1992). This actor-network-theory (ANT) approach is therefore being referred to at numerous occasions in practice theory literature (Hirschauer 1999, 2004; Laube 2012; Reckwitz 2002, 2003; Schatzki 2002). But although its contribution and proximity to practice theory is somewhat acknowledged, arguments seem rather against an integration of ANT. For example Hirschauer (2004) refers to it as being too techno-centric and disregardful of the body, without him taking into account the concept of materially heterogeneous actors, which ANT related authors have brought up (Harraway 1991; Latour 1993; Callon&Law 1995). Also when critique on ANT (Collins&Yearly 1992; Bloor 1999) is cited in practice theory literature, rather rarely the clarifying replies (Callon&Latour 1992; Latour 1999) are included and considered too (cf. Schatzki 2002).

But what this paper aims at is not pinpointing passages that could use a bit more of ANT. This paper wants to take up and explore an issue Reckwitz (2002: 213) formulated at the node of bodies/minds and artefacts: ‘One of the major issues is to what extent such an “integration” and “instrumentalization” of Latour into practice theory is possible and to what extent there remain considerable theoretical differences between a practice theory which is modified along lines of a theory of artefacts on the one hand and Latour’s “symmetric anthropology” on the other hand’. Having an ANT perspective, the paper will examine if and how such a symmetric understanding of humans and non-humans can be (made) compatible with practice theory. As this field of theory is very varied, a selection of approaches with an emphasis on materiality and empirical data (Hirschauer 1999, 2004; Shove&Pantzar 2005) shall be taken into consideration for a comparative analysis. Furthermore a reference to empirical data of field observation collected within my PhD study is feasible, if it can add to a rich description.

Although the approach of the paper is explorative – as in if there is a theoretical common ground to be worked out – there are three basic assumptions that need to be explicated. First, I do assume there is common ground to be found. Second, I think that neglecting the
possibilities ANT has to offer is counterproductive; rather it could enrich praxeological accounts. This leads to the third assumption, which stands in opposition to Reckwitz’ statement (2002: 214) on the asymmetric relation of artefacts and humans in practice theory: ‘The distinction between such a position and Latour’s pleading for a “symmetric anthropology” should not be blurred; (…)’. My assumption being, that blurring these boundaries is not something to be avoided, but something to aspire for its potential fruitfulness. At the same time I whole heartedly agree with the continuation of above quotation, that ‘(…) rather, the debate whether within social practices there is or is not any substantial difference between human agents and non-human “actants” must continue’ (.ibid), with the twist of referring hereby to ANT. So the aim here is to contribute to this debate in showing the possibilities of loosening up boundaries instead of reinforcing them and what this kind of reverse boundary work has to offer.

References


