Sociology of translation versus Economics of interaction:

A Rap Battle

The ANT and IMP approaches compared

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Abstract

It is 2005. In recent years a few presenters at IMP conferences have been flirting with actor-network theory (ANT) (e.g. Mattson 2003, Araujo 2004, Kjellberg and Helgesson 2004). To our knowledge, the opposite is not equally true. Not so many ANTs have flirted with IMP, that is.

In this paper we are using a *rap battle* to sort out the differences and similarities between ANT and IMP. At first glance probably looking like an odd idea, but on the other hand, using words within a standard format to ridicule opponents and promote oneself (or rather one's ideas) should not sound too unfamiliar to academic writers. An important feature in this respect is that theorists, as well as rappers, need to be quite similar to those they are "competing" with in order to communicate (and even to understand the rules for communication). Albeit theorists, or rappers, use much energy to distinguish themselves from others, this is only possible when opponents have a lot in common. We believe that there are many similarities, and perhaps some important differences, between ANT and IMP. At least they have more in common than the word 'network'. We believe both approaches to focus on relationalism and unbounded networks. By scrutinising these differences and similarities we hope to say something about where they can fruitfully contribute to each other, where they have interfaces that should remain interfaces and not overlaps, and maybe where they both seem to miss out on important issues. In our reading of the theories, we find 'interaction' (in IMP) and 'translation' (ANT) to be some kind of basic concepts through which these approaches might be understood. We will focus some of the discussion around these two words, or concepts, or network building blocks, or whatever they turn out to be.

Introduction

It is 2005. In recent years a few presenters at IMP conferences have been flirting with ANT (e.g. Mattson 2003, Araujo 2004, Kjellberg and Helgesson 2004). To our knowledge, the opposite is not equally true. Not so many ANTs have flirted with IMP, that is. Already after four sentences the acronyms IMP and ANT are used two times each (now three times) without any explanation. Maybe because this paper partly is trying to explain what these approaches are? Anyway, we should at least write what they stand for. IMP stands for the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing group. In this paper, however, it just as much stands for the industrial network approach, or industrial network theory if you want. The three letters IMP are supposed to encompass a model proposed to be an alternative to the market model. It is thus a way to describe and explain business behaviour in interactive terms, an 'economy of interaction'. ANT stands for Actor-Network Theory. It is also known as Sociology of Translation. In fact, it seems like several of ANTs founding fathers dislike the idea that the concepts and ideas associated with ANT should ever be called a theory. This is probably because of a (too?) conscious view on philosophy of science, which is not strange considering that science was their first, and is still probably their main, study object. ANT is trying to capture how meaning is established and maintained.

We have wondered whether actor-network theory and the industrial network approach are the one and the same, just applied on (or rather derived from) different empirical phenomena. Or even that the industrial network approach could be seen as an unconscious version of ANT. At least they have more in common than the word 'network'. We believe both approaches to focus on relationism and unbounded networks. Although at first sight, ANT seems to have a much more well-founded and reflective basis than the industrial network approach, it may appear so because the respective theorists have been involved in quite different debates. Researchers employing ANT have been forced to consider the philosophical underpinnings and make them explicit, while within IMP the big debates have centred on what makes the industrial network approach different from the traditional market model.

So, we have one "theory" of business behaviour and another "theory" of science production and maybe it does not seem intuitive why these should be treated in the same paper. We believe that there are many similarities, and perhaps some important differences, between ANT and IMP. By scrutinising these differences and similarities we hope to say something about where they can fruitfully contribute to each other, where they have interfaces that should remain interfaces and not overlaps, and maybe where they both seem to miss out on important issues.

From reading the two approaches we find 'interaction' to be an important word within IMP: *"Interaction means that no action by an individual is either isolated or independent"* (Håkansson and Ford, 2005). Equally, 'translation' is similarly important within ANT: *"'translation'…refers to all the displacements through other actors whose mediation is indispensable for any action to occur"* Latour (1999, p.311). We will focus some of the discussion on these two words, or concepts, or network building blocks, or whatever they turn out to be.

Method

Maybe some of you have seen "8 Mile"? Maybe some of you have not even heard of it? It is a film starring the rap icon Eminem. The plot is simple:
Poor white boy wants to be a rap hero. He participates in a so-called rap battle, but fails completely. Everybody make a fool out of him. He goes back to his miserable life and experiences repeated trials. In the end he contests at the ultimate rap battle and wins everything.
A standard fairy tale dramaturgy, but that is not what interest us here. Our interest lay in the rap battle as a story telling device. A rap battle is a competition where a person (normally a male) use words and rhymes to promote himself and to ridicule another person (also normally a male). The concept is not new, in Norway we have an old tradition with "stev", and we believe similar traditions exist elsewhere. For instance in academic writing.

Well, we must admit that the use of rhymes is not especially widespread in academia. But using words within a standard format to ridicule opponents and promote oneself (or rather one's ideas) does not sound unfamiliar, does it?

An important feature in this respect is that theorists, as well as rappers, need to be quite similar to those they are "competing" with in order to communicate (and even to understand the rules for communication). Albeit theorists, or rappers, use much energy to distinguish themselves from others, this is only possible when opponents have a lot in common. Phew! These were many words to explain why we are using a rap battle to sort out the differences between ANT and IMP. We believe the two approaches to be pretty similar. Thus, we will let each of the two "theories" spit out their accusations about the other's incompetence. Hopefully, the accusations will be answered. Where they are not, where they are instead left unanswered, is probably where the differences between the two approaches can be found. At least, that is how we are likely to conclude. In order to keep the rhymes and the rhythm we have left out the references in the battle itself, but we have made comments between sections of verses where references can be found. So, let the battle begin!

Rap Battle ("Results")

Intro

IMP: I am IMP
yeah, you know me.
I look at companies
who link their activities
and tie their resources
They join forces
by repeated interaction
action and reaction
relationships are made and kept

ANT: In a world of change
How can heterogeneous networks become stable?
Get the factishes on the table
use a whole range
of concepts to be able
to capture the translations
involved in network formations.

IMP: I look at industry
at business reality
but what about ANT?
what do you study?

ANT: the making of reality
I study the sciences
building of alliances
the ordering of societies

…and so it goes on. In every such rap battle it is up to the audience to decide on the winner, just like in academia – a theory is successful primarily because of the crowds of researchers and texts supporting it. In this respect this article might be seen as an attempt to help ourselves and our readers make better informed choices. Whether to use one or the other, or to combine them.

Settings: Studying Industry and Business value

IMP: Think you can be used for everything
Everything in society, you're overweening
Stick to what you're developed for
and become useful for something more

Born in the cradle of science studies,
studying laboratory work of scientist buddies,
Ambitious fool, carrying little of use
for inquiring resource values

ANT: I know what I do, what I can be used for
A new sociology, nothing less nothing more
Been thinking about philosophy, it's an art
done my homework from the start
I give name to processes and strategies
Shaping of the social, the battle of enemies
I give shape to plots and narratives,
Description as analysis

IMP: I am a lot more realistic; I know where my place is
Messing around with everything is just a miss
We are experts on industrial reality
Know all their technology,
Interaction and heavy structures
of investments and relations
But coercing economic forces
Are still the network's sources

The first difference the contenders raise is of the obvious sort, namely that ANT and IMP are concerned with different entities. ANT has been used for a wide range of subjects, for instance technological development (cf. Law and Bijker 1992 for several such studies), but probably most of all for the study of scientific knowledge production (cf. Latour and Callon 1981, Latour 1987, and Latour 2001). IMP, on the other hand, has been occupied with what happens between industrial partners, for instance purchasing, marketing, and technological development (cf. Håkansson et al 2004 and Håkansson & Waluszewski 2002). ANT has the advantage of being able to jump across old scientific boundaries. In principle, whether an actor is sorting under chemistry, political science, economy or biology does not matter, hence it can be used to show how an actor-network is formed and stabilized in different settings. However, when applied to very different settings from those where ANT were shaped in the first place, science and technology, it is obvious that its conceptual basis come short. This is one reason for the large effort amongst some ANT and STS researchers in studying and conceptualising economic phenomena these days (e.g. Callon 1999 and Knorr-Cetina 2004). In IMP there is at the moment no language to capture all those that influence on industry without themselves being part of it, leading to several projects on developing theory on the making of markets (e.g. Mattsson 2003, Kjellberg & Helgeson 2004), the role of science (e.g. Waluszewski….), and ongoing doctoral projects on the role of institutions, infrastructure, and culture on industrial networks.

In spite of their concerns with different entities and actors, both approaches work without levels or maybe on all levels, ANT making explicit remarks about how the distinction between micro and macro is a flaw to begin with (Latour & Callon 1981), and IMP working both with unbounded and emerging networks and with networks as more or less stable structures. However, their processes towards these views have been very different. The focus now turns towards the theoretical underpinnings of these approaches, and both bring serious accusations to the arena:

Philosophy

ANT: In the long run you'll get penalized
for not having ground work emphasized
Lazyness gains nobody,
Find epistemology and ontology
What's the norm
It shouldn't be accepted in any form
And by naming entities and not processes
Your stories become a huge mess

IMP: Decide on values and you're in trouble
         Making war with some
         Excluding some others, getting lonesome
         Still, you're wrong
         We've had our discussions
         Related to our models and studies
         But we have room for different opinions
         Not forcing them into narrow dominions
         Please, you make me weary
         Account for yourself, tell of your theory

ANT, with its large focus on science production, has been forced to take its philosophical underpinnings seriously. It is almost a separate philosophy in itself, stating that epistemology does not exist and that all humans and non-humans are taking part in ontological activities, thus suggesting a kind of relational realism/materialism (Latour 1999, Law 1994) with close relationships to constructivism. IMP, on the other hand, has not shown the same degree of consciousness on this issue. Few authors within the IMP community have written about the philosophical stands of the approach, an exception being Easton (1995) who has clearly stated his position as a critical realist. Reading between the lines, we think we recognize both interpretativist and constructivist, as well as various realist positions in the IMP literature. We think that the IMP perspective would benefit analytically through clarifications and discussions of its philosophy and underlying basic assumptions. We believe the reluctance to do this has partly been due to the eclectic nature of IMP and the desire to establish a critical mass of 'followers.' Ford and Håkansson (2005) raise some of these issues, although not too explicitly linked to philosophy. The underlying philosophy of the approaches is closely coupled to basic assumptions and methodology, which is the next theme our "rappers" are dealing with.

Basic assumptions and methodology

ANT: Systematic research on the making of society
         Making no presumptions of causality
         I do not discriminate between races of actors,
         Others than humans might be important factors
         I'm bringing non-humans back in
         wondering who'll win
         Texts, technologies, and even nature are in
         Actors are those who act,
         Interact, making fact

         I produce coherent stories,
         Stripping managers from heroic glories
         How the look of individual greatness
         is collective representation by loyal supporters
         But be on guard,
         it is a house of cards
         Betrayal might be just around the corner
         Transforming the hero into a weeping mourner
         Network as continuous process of becoming
         Not as stable as it looks in the beginning

IMP: Sounds like French to me
         Why all this difficult conspiracy
         Use our simple models and learn
         you'll immediately discern
         what matters, what ties together
         how relations are forever
         an issue of interaction and embedded structure
         seldom allowing rupture

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ANT:    I speak of translations
        Defining and aligning actors in relations
        Counting loyal actors
        counts more than size and other factors
        Associating elements into reality
        Network effects of heterogeneity
        movement as transformation
        Pure transfer would be a sensation

IMP:    That's to start in the wrong end
        Better to identify the smallest bits
        And see how they together form a fit
        Interaction is our basic element of reproduction
        Divided into exchange and adaptation
        Resulting in structure of relationships
        Your whole will never be complete
        such megalomania I will defeat
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These verses bring us to another of the differences between ANT and IMP. Crudely speaking, we could say that ANT sees the world as ever changing, thus looking for those few and unlikely instances of stability (Law 1994), whereas IMP tend to see the world, or at least industrial relationships, as rather stable, looking for those few instances of change (Håkansson & Waluszewski 2001). It is, of course, highly relevant here to ask if this can be traced back to differing assumptions about the world, or if it just is a matter of different observations and experiences of their empirical fields.

IMP brings forth its concept of 'interaction', as the most basic building block of relationships and networks, and therefore the starting point for research. This is one of IMP's strengths over ANT; its simple and intuitive set of concepts and models, it is not difficult to learn this language or to apply it to case studies of industrial settings. Interestingly several authors have pointed at the lack of definition or conceptualisation of this unquestionably central notion (e.g. Ford & Ritter 2004), and we think that the downside to this simplicity and lack of definition might be a weaker analytical capacity of the approach. ANT answers with 'translation', a concept comprising series of interactions, of technical and social struggles to give interaction a certain direction and outcome. Hence, the concept provides a stronger narrative and explanatory touch to the analysis, but at the same time it put the author in danger of explaining everything as translation and thus not really explaining anything. Anyhow, the analysis in both approaches is about (re-)telling stories in the form of case studies with the help of a set of analytical tools; concepts and models to organize and give insight to the empirical field.

How the stories are told is what our contenders are turning to, thundering away on each other.

Telling stories of love and war; conceptual

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ANT:    In "our" world no points are fixed
        Non-human actors have the same status as humans...they are mixed.
        Technology defines humans as humans define technology,
        that is the heart of our sociology
        The words we use are vague, almost fractured...
        But useful for this symmetry to be captured
        A language where the social meets nature
        That defines every creature
        Because nothing is either or
        There is no reason for
        A silly science war

IMP:    Our approach has a positive flare
        of companies that care
        About each other, they share
        Information, machines, even destiny
        That is why we
        Use allegories like dance
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With hints to romance
Not to say it's all a dance on roses
It may be just as much neuroses
All of you who have tried to relate
Know that there's a fine line between love and hate
Still, these traits are human
Not something that physical objects can
possess, they have no intentions
Although they may indirectly hinder – make interventions

ANT: Are you saying we are full of negativity?
Should we rather say closer to reality?
Enemies are not only a word, they are true
With their own interests to pursue
So you must enrol allies
To make your actor-network grow in size
To make science, or economics
Or religion, it is all politics
And if you cannot get the non-human actors on your side
Your truth vanishes, it dies

IMP: That is the problem with you, ANT
Can't you see?
When you try to explain everything
You end up with nothing
No gained understanding

ANT: If someone has a problem, it is you
If you believe separation is the clue.
You try to extract industrial economy
And end up with – at best – a taxonomy

ANT is partly built on semiotics and words and language are used deliberately to structure the studies. In an interview with Bruno Latour (Ihle and Sellinger 2003) he states that: "The vocabulary I have used is very bad and it is meant to be bad...[T]he whole vocabulary of Actor-Network Theory is a way of moving from one agency to the next...[W]e need a very poor vocabulary, composed of stupid terms, to function infra-conceptually" (p.18). The terms are thus not intended to have any explanatory power in themselves, but rather to facilitate explanations. Most of the terms in IMP have their origin in business, or organisational, fields. Activities, actors, and resources from the former; networks, relationships, and interaction from the latter. These words have the risk of being confused as they often have other definitions in other uses. The language in the approaches can aid in understanding their differences and similarities concerning agency.

Every object is granted the possibility to act in ANT, but it is not only the intentional acts that are counted. One of the main points in ANT has been to get rid of the divide between nature and society, denying that 'intentions' or 'agency' – understood as internal capabilities in (human) actors – are *in principle* more important explanatory factors in social studies. Acknowledging that intentions *sometimes* make a difference, ANT views agency as a relational effect of heterogeneous networks, thus insisting on questions of actor-status and other effecting factors as empirical matters. IMP's actors are of human nature and their intentions are supposed to play a large and important role. This is very clear in the basic divide between resources (all 'dead' things, but sometimes even actors and relationships) and actors (humans or human assemblies, e.g. organizations). Having said this, there are examples of IMP studies where resources resemble actors. Several of the machines in Håkansson and Waluszewski's book (2002) are intervening with the human actors. They seem to play a role in themselves. When this happens, the approaches are certainly moving toward each other.

Language and structuring of studies are closely coupled to the content; the empirical material, which also can be debated.

Telling real stories; empirical

IMP: Why do you show up at our conference
When all you state is nonsense
We have thousands of observations
From several nations
Of industrial relations
They are an empirical reality
No abnormality
No modelling assumption
They must serve a function
Fulfilling some needs
For business companies
This may be no sensation
But is a provocation
To those who believe
In a model of classical economy
We give the actors identity – autonomy
So there it is, right in your face
If you don't believe us, get out of our place

ANT: We have our own conference, it's called 4S
And there, of course, you have access
Come and have a talk at our sessions
If you believe you can teach us some lessons
But don't believe that the focus on empirical
Makes you special
We're pretty good at observed material
Do you believe our actants come out of the blue?
We follow paths were translation occurs
And use our language to make you, the reader, sure
That the stories we tell are really true
We have read some of your descriptions
They contained no explanations
Too much detail
So you fail
To tell the convincing story
It gets boring
Can you hear me snoring?
So don't come to us and talk about the necessity of observation
And your claims of your model being provoking
– Blah! Don't make me laugh, you must be joking
We know, we're French, we invented provocation

IMP: It just shows, again, that we are different
We're not writing just for entertainment
To provoke is to push away, we think
Instead we want other economists to be convinced
That our model is a rightful description
Of economic life – fact, not fiction
We don't believe it's under your jurisdiction
To put our concepts under conviction
We have useful ones
As network position, BR's as resources, and friction

IMP studies can be rich in details, capturing impressive amounts of what goes on in industrial relationships (cf. Wedin 2001, Holmen 2001, Håkansson and Waluszewski 2002). ANT theorists often seem to include only those parts that make up a good story. These differences may, however, be more related to the presentation of empirical material, than the actual collection of it. The approaches seem to have a similar open position when it comes to collecting data, and a similar belief in that the

empirical world best can describe its own activities. Moreover, both are certainly stressing that technical detail (and other) not should be ignored; they may indeed have profound influence in the story. Interviews, documents and observation are thus important methods in both approaches.

Drawing things together (summing up, similarities, differences)

ANT: We have the 4S, you have the 4 R's
It is not like you're from Venus and we're from Mars
It does not seem like we're opposing poles
Rather we play similar roles
But maybe not in the same act?
You search for profit and we for the established fact

Maybe you can help us in grasping the economy
So we can build an even better theory
Of course with the roots in ANT

IMP: We don't want to be part of your projects
Although we share some concepts
Or at least a few words
We look at different networks
Our aim is to understand the business economy
The industry
The development of technology
Other aspects of society
Or, if you want, reality
Have even greater variety
They are better treated by others
Maybe you, or perhaps you have some theoretical brothers?

ANT: But you have a good grip on heterogeneity
Stop believing your resources
Are only of business importance
They make sense to a larger society

Like us you give no prescriptions
You stick to descriptions
Which could of course be more exciting
Less business love, more fighting

IMP: You almost religious believer in your own theory
So keen to be famous
Your followers are so homogenous
The same words, the same basic beliefs
Our proponents are of a more varied nature
Maybe because we are more inclusive than exclusive
We don't have a hostile stature

Why would we join forces with you
If swallow us is all you want to do
And follow your own ideas through
We hoped to understand the economy better
By learning what you do
But that is all we want to
Not be a part of your crew

ANT: You haven't understood a word I've said, you dummy
The economy is not disconnected from the rest
Although we could need your help on the economy

our understanding of religion and variation stands the test
Your hollow variation is not impressive
Everybody working with just a tiny fraction of the world
It is rather depressive
If you take relations seriously
You have to see
All the politics connected to the economy
Power, gender, institutions
Are just a few of our variations
We have much material to choose from
But if you want to stay narrow, be welcome

In these last verses we see the contenders giving each other some credit between the accusations, but not ending up in any self-obliterating consensus on everything.

Conclusions

Our battle has maybe left you with the idea that the contenders end up repelling each other. There are, however, numerous examples in the "rap world" of contenders who feature on each other's records. The winner may invite the loser and vice versa. Transferred to our analogy, it means that it should be possible for the two theories to contribute to each other, although they showed glimpses of true hostility. It may be no secret that we, the authors, have faith in both theories, but see some areas for improvement.

The entities studied by IMP and ANT are different, they seem to have an opposite view on stability and change, and the way studies are presented is different. Still, they have a lot in common; their way of dealing with the empirical world, their unbounded networks and their basic belief in the world as relational realism, contrary to naive realism or relativism.

ANT does not have a good conception of **value** in an economical sense. IMP may aid in providing such. Although the concept of value is not fully developed within IMP, there are several definitions employed. Profit is of course one example, being a driving force for business activity. Such a value, as a goal and a part of the actors' intentions, may be a stabilizing element in an industrial world. Without values, it is hard to give any reasons for why actors act. Thus, ANT may give us good descriptions of how translations occur, but leave us in the blind on the question of why they occur. On the other hand, several studies within IMP lend explanations from society outside the "industrial world". Then it is a paradox that the industrial network model only includes business actors, business activities, and business resources. It should be possible to keep the model simple, but still let **politics** in. And then we speak of politics in a wider sense. ANT does not distinguish between "political politics", and the politics performed by scientists, religious leaders, or industrialists. It has proved fruitful there, as it could within IMP. Related to this is how IMP theorists, for instance Welch and Wilkinson (2002) and Håkansson and Waluszewski (2002), have made a separation between a physical structure and an idea structure. When ideas are placed on a separate level they only become loosely connected to the physical world. Although the latter authors refer to Latour and translation when explaining the idea structure, they do not seem to follow ANT in that ideas are carried by the actors.

What do we want? For ANT and IMP to merge and to be one and the same? We are actually not sure. As for the time being, they live in such separate worlds that such a solution is probably no issue. However, it should be possible to lend concepts from one another when necessary, especially where the two approaches intersect like for instance in dealing with technical development. That is were we end, for now, with a hope that ANT shall be able to understand the economy and that IMP shall start looking outside its "borders" and make descriptions that better link business relationships to other phenomena in society.

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