

Week 10
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What is the social?

This is the question at the heart of all of the readings this week, and one which has been a long time coming. In a variety of fields, although primarily of concern to sociologists, the use of the 'social' has become the underlying explanation for a variety of different phenomena. In a way, the term the 'social' has the feeling of 'ritual' in archaeology: just as the term 'ritual' is thrown out for this that cannot be explained in a logical or functional way, the 'social' is a catch-all term for things that cannot be described as political, economic, religious, etc. This ambiguity has marked the 'social' as an endangered term which many in the field of sociology, and particularly STS, must redefine, not through deconstruction, as has been *de rigueur*, but through reassembly. In attempting to reassemble the social, however, we must address the chasm for which the 'social' has often been used as a bridge. This is the divide between the individual and the collective. Although this is a problem noted primarily by Callon and Law as plaguing sociology, which is something also brought up by Bruno Latour, the gap between the individual and the collective is a fundamental concern for archaeology today. At a point in our history where the division between processualism and post-processualism has cooled, and when there is an acknowledgment that both grand narrative and the individual story are things which archaeology can address, we seem to be stuck at a point where we do not know the best way to bridge the gap. After such a long period of being obsessed with the local and the individual, there is a need to move past the anecdotal and individual instance into more coherent narratives of larger subjects. In order to

avoid a return to grand narratives and universalizations, we need to come up with a new way in which to tie the individual to the collective, and Latour and Callon and Law provide new ways of doing this.

In his introduction to the book, *Reassembling the Social*, Latour seeks to break free of the generalizing and stifling term 'social' and reassemble it as a trail of associations between heterogeneous elements. By not allowing the 'social' to be the answer or the adjective of description, Latour opens new possibilities for sociology, and other fields as well, to trace associations. This book is not just an introduction to Actor-Network-Theory, it is about using the method of ANT to reassemble the social by following the actors and tracing their multiple associations and translations. In order to do this, however, Latour lays out a few key concepts that are then picked in many works that are heavily influenced by Latour. One key point is that non-humans must be actors, not just as hapless bearers of symbolic projection, but real actors. This is a point especially emphasized in Webmoor and Whitmore's article *Things Are Us!*, in which the authors seek to breakdown the dichotomy of subject and object by making the point that we are mingled with things in an ontologically indivisible way. This fits in nicely with ANT and forces us to reconsider how we thinking of production. Webmoor and Whitmore put forward the case study of the Millon map of Teotihuacan as an active participant in the world, but also a thing comprised of humans. Their case study was one of archaeological production, but such an example can easily be found within craft production. By not dividing the human from the raw material for instance, but each as actors within a network, we are able to look at these and other components of

production as mutual actors that constitute and are shaped by the network. The construction of the network then builds the social rather than at some point looking at an economic view of production and realizing that the ambiguous and unidentifiable 'social' has been left out.

While Latour's work has been incredibly influential to many scholars, he also is clearly looking beyond the world of sociology alone. Latour notes that the origin of his ANT approach lay in the need for a new social theory adjusted to Science, Technology and Society. The fact that this is where ANT originated is quite telling, since society and science are often placed at odds with a wide gulf between them. In reading the article by Callon and Law, many of the concepts they outline as the STS way to overcome the divide between the individual and the collective can be seen in Latour's work. Most notably is the emphasis that the social is materially heterogeneous. Here Callon and Law's work overlaps with Latour, but where Latour is trying to build an approach, Callon and Law are trying to build principles for understanding the social. Each of their four principles fits within their goal to breakdown dichotomies and give some description of the social, but some things could be added and subtracted to make it more useful. Firstly, the concept that entities have variable geometry allows for constant change and action without constantly terming something as a dialectic, but if we are to truly break free of a divide between individual and collective, it needs to be asserted that the networks made up of the entities are multi-scalar as well. Whereas Latour, at least in the introduction we read, described the networks as lying on a flat plane, more three-dimensional flexibility may make the concept more workable.

Overall, Callon and Law's article was a productive way to conceive of networks, but their assertion of avoiding dichotomies was undercut at the very end of their paper by the use of "hybrid collectifs" to describe specific and materially heterogeneous relations. When attempting to avoid *a priori* categories of individual and collective, structure and agency, discussing the relations as "hybrid" automatically bifurcates terms into two predetermined groups. It also makes each group distinct and bounded, going completely against the principle of every entity having variable geometry. If the authors left this term out of the article, and just focused on the concept of networks, their overall argument would have been much more sound.