

Food, actor-networks and "the transatlantic destiny of Michel Foucault"

Presenters: Eric Sarmiento and Nate Gabriel

Presented at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, 2011

email: ersarm@eden.rutgers.edu nategabriel@gmail.com

I. Intro

Social theorists employing actor-network theory (ANT) have frequently come under attack by critical scholars for failing to adequately address or critique asymmetrical power relations, and thus acquiescing or even supporting the *status quo*. Critics of Michel Callon¹, for example, contend that his investigations of economic assemblages, “[turn] out...to be an overture to a prospective alliance to be struck with neoclassical economists.” Responding to similar criticisms, Bruno Latour asserts that many critical analyses of unequal power relations justify themselves and explain the relations they scrutinize by saying in effect, “Power relations are unequal *because* powerful actors exert their power over weaker actors.” Latour, Callon and other ANT theorists contend that such an analysis obscures more than it reveals by failing to demonstrate *how* some actors are more powerful than others, an omission that tends to narrow down possibilities for transformation and forecloses the emergence of other worlds. Despite such clear efforts at engaging with the political consequences of their work Latour is seen as leaving little ground on which to gain political traction.

By contrast, Michel Foucault's work is celebrated for its ability to stir and mobilize the ethical and emotional energies of those who engage with it, enabling researchers (among others) to critique social arrangements, and thus to attempt to modify them. We find this particularly interesting in light of Latour's desire to rescue Foucault from what he calls his transatlantic destiny. Latour reminds us that: "No one was more precise in their analytical decomposition of the tiny ingredients from which power is made and no one was more critical of social explanations [than Foucault]." Latour goes on to say, however, that "as soon as Foucault was

translated, he was immediately turned into the one who had “revealed” power relations *behind* every innocuous activity and that “even the genius of Foucault could not prevent such a total inversion.”

In what follows, we examine Foucault's work together with Latour's, a juxtaposition that we find helpful for thinking through and enacting a food politics of possibility. First, we will spend a few minutes discussing complementary points in the work of Latour and Foucault, and discuss how bringing their approaches together can, in the words of J.K Gibson-Graham, “broaden... the field of possibility”ⁱⁱ for action and transformation. Next, we advance the idea that Foucault's 'assemblages' and Latour's 'networks' can be seen as the ongoing, improvisational effect of negotiations between a wide range of interdependent actorsⁱⁱⁱ. We contend that the Nietzschean concept of 'will to power' can enable a critical approach to food studies that fosters possibility, a contention that we explore through Gibson-Graham's concept of the 'hybrid research collective' (HRC). Finally, we will illustrate these ideas by relating them to ongoing research on an innovative alternative food network, the Oklahoma Food Cooperative.

II. Bruno and Michel, two peas in a pod

As we just noted, Latour^{iv} responds to critics who accuse him of failing to take into account unequal power relations by asserting that he and other ANT scholars are essentially following in the footsteps of Foucault, arguably one of the foremost theorists of power. In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour outlines five sources of uncertainty, or controversies about “*what* this universe is made of”^v, each of which we see as perfectly compatible, even representative, of key aspects of Foucault's work, but here we will focus on two: the third source (in which Latour argues that “objects too have agency”) and the fourth source (in which he

discusses the difference between "matters of fact" and "matters of concern"). The idea that objects have agency stems from Latour's assertion that relational configurations must be constantly kept up and reinforced, that no actor is powerful enough to perfectly maintain its position alone. In order to account for the durability of particular power relations, we must expand analysis to explicitly include non-human actors, including so-called inanimate objects. But Latour makes the crucial distinction between 'intermediaries' and 'mediators'. The former term refers to the idea that some actors simply transmit the flow of action without actively transforming it, while the latter refers to the idea that all actors (human or otherwise) transform this flow as they act. Thus, from an ANT perspective, it is not enough to simply include objects in our accounts if those non-human actors serve as simply 'expressions' of the agency of some 'powerful actor,' be it 'neoliberalism,' 'capitalism,' or the WTO.

As mediators then, objects can be seen to possess a kind of agency, a capacity to act, and roles to play in producing, maintaining or transforming an assemblage of actors. Such language is strikingly reminiscent of Foucault's notion of power as more than a constraining or negative force, reflected in his effort to trace how relations between heterogeneous actors, including non-humans, produce particular social arrangements. For example, Foucault spends considerable time in *The History of Sexuality* tracing the material participants that mediate assemblages to produce 'sexuality' as such. These include changes in the design of houses that emphasized a 'polarity' between parents' and children's bedrooms, breastfeeding techniques, and the apparatus for the surveillance of children.^{vi} All these are examples of how non-humans are more than inert tools of powerful actors, but part of what he calls "a network of pleasures and powers linked together at multiple points and according to transformable relationships"^{vii}.

Latour also draws our attention, in his fourth source of uncertainty, to the the distinction

between "matters of fact" and "matters of concern." While he highlights this distinction in an attempt to do away with the dualisms that characterize much of 'western' thought, for our purposes it's sufficient to note the Latourian notion that 'facts' are 'true' precisely because they are 'constructed', engendered, or provoked by 'matters of concern.'

While Latour calls his exploration of the interplay of matters of concern and matters of fact 'tracing a network,' Foucault does similar work under the Nietzschean concept 'genealogy', which Deleuze described as an "interpretation of the values which presuppose evaluations, 'perspectives of appraisal' from which [the value of values] is derived"^{viii}. Thus, both Foucault's genealogy and Latour's ANT are at their core concerned with the proliferating matters of concern associated with particular assemblages that enable their formation, transform them, and at times defeat them.

So we begin to see the common ground that Foucault and Latour occupy, but how does this help us think about politics? More to the point, how can this work be politically useful for us as researchers? In replying to his critics, Latour makes the point clearly^{ix}: "Sociologists of associations [who] wish to ... [argue that] power is unequally distributed ... also have to *explain* how domination has become so efficacious and through which unlikely means. Quite reasonably, *it is for them the only way to make it modifiable*". In short, yoking all actors and actions to any overarching theoretical black-box confers an unwarranted degree of power to objects such as 'neoliberalism' by ceding an excess of agency to particular actors in our accounts.

Consequently, performing such narratives may contribute towards the production of effects that are quite the opposite of those desired by the critical social theorist, by impairing the ability of research subjects, policy makers, funding agencies, and indeed ourselves to recognize

difference and the possibilities for intervention. By contrast, the Foucauldian ANT we advocate here can actively proliferate and highlight the contingencies that riddle all assemblages, thus providing us and our allies with an ever-expanding set of opportunities for intervention: it can heighten our awareness of potential alliances and partnerships, and it can help us avoid the blind spots that so often crop up in even the best-intentioned endeavors.

III. Difference, Will to power, and the hybrid research collective

We have argued that the projects of Foucault and Latour share much common ground. Their work rethinks power and relationality, and in doing so contributes to the production of – and here we’re quoting from Deleuze, “a new organization of the sciences, a new organization of philosophy, [and] a determination of the values of the future.” But wait, that last statement is from Deleuze’s book not on Foucault or Latour, but from his book about Nietzsche! In the next section, we will argue that the work of both Foucault, who made his debt to Nietzsche explicit, and Latour is informed by the Nietzschean concept of will to power, an idea that we will relate to a food politics of possibility.

The Foucauldian ANT (or Latourian genealogy) approach that we sketched out here requires us to look specifically at the interactions between differently situated actors, and actively interpret the way those negotiations of difference maintain or transform assemblages. For Nietzsche, the concept of difference was closely tied to his idea of ‘will to power.’ This complex idea is often taken to refer to a conscious lust for power of willing subjects; something like the desire to dominate and acquire power over others. But Nietzsche makes clear at several points that will to power is not the subject’s lust for power over others, it *is* the subject itself, or more specifically, in Liz Grosz’s words, “It is the deed, not the doer of the deed.” It is

something more like a collection of multivalent forces that constitutes the actors that make up the world – humans, but also rocks, tsunamis, the microbiome, wolfpacks, etc.

These forces produce and emerge from the particular configurations of bodies, if we expand the meaning of ‘bodies’ to include not just organisms but also objects and collective bodies, what Deleuze and Guattari call the “body-without-organs.” As they put it, “We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body.”

Taken together, these attributes suggest that will to power emerges from difference and in turn produces still more differentiation as it folds in on itself, cuts transversally across bodies, and joins (or separates) disparate particles in unexpected configurations. These differences between (and within) actors are not always limiting or constraining, but to the contrary, as Foucault and Latour remind us, they themselves are the generative forces that produce and transform the world. From this starting point, we might imagine research on AFNs that explores difference not as something to be overcome, but as a necessary resource in overcoming existing limitations.

Here, we’d like to connect these ideas with Gibson-Graham and Roelvink’s (2010) idea of the hybrid research collective (HRC). Drawing heavily on Latour and ANT, Gibson-Graham and Roelvink argue that researchers have a new role in the Anthropocene epoch. The HRC, however, pushes this idea beyond the human subject-centered approach that informed much of Gibson-Graham’s earlier work, and calls on researchers to consider knowledge production and learning as a process of “learning to be affected” by diverse others, including a range of more-

than-human actors.

We see will to power as a useful concept in this in that it focuses on the diverse needs, drives and capacities of differently situated actors within any given network. These differences lie at the heart of what Gibson-Graham and Roelvink call the “negotiation of interdependence.” In terms of researching AFNs, this stance perhaps suggests some specific ways in which we might rely on difference and will to power as a resource, an idea that we will illustrate through a discussion of ongoing research with the Oklahoma Food Cooperative.

IV. Difference, negotiation, and ‘becoming-with’ in the OFC

This innovative alternative food system is uniquely organized in that it brings together both producers and customers in the same cooperative structure in a flexible collaboration that spans much of the state. Customers place orders via an open source-based website where producers list available items each month. On monthly delivery days, thousands of different products converge on a distribution center in Oklahoma City, where they are sorted by member volunteers before being sent out to pick-up locations around the state. The OFC’s core values are social justice, economic sustainability, and environmental stewardship. The group has grown rapidly, providing critical income for many rural and urban Oklahomans as well as fresh and nutritious food produced without the use of heavy chemical inputs, concentrated animal feeding operations, or lopsided surplus distribution.

The OFC is the ideal place to pursue the idea of will to power as flowing through the diverse mediators that maintain and transform assemblages because members have taken a certain stance towards difference and ‘becoming-with’ diverse others all along, when founders enrolled both producers and consumers, despite advice and reigning knowledge of cooperative

fundamentals that coops can only survive with homogenous membership who share unified interests. The members of the OFC were from the very beginning, in the words of several members, “urban liberals” and “rural conservatives”; moreover, they are spread out around the state, a spatial distribution that itself implies a wide range of interests, concerns and orientations. Membership is also diverse in terms of gender, income, race, age, and religion.

These differences, however, have been viewed from the beginning not as something to be overcome, but as a fertile ground for *self-overcoming*. Research reveals that many members view participation and negotiation within the coop as key to their own “evolution,” specifically in regard to their changing production practices and consumption habits. In other words, the OFC already sees itself as something of a HRC in action; they cultivate a stance of openness towards being transformed by negotiation with a wide range of diverse others. In the words of founding president Bob Waldrop, the OFC has discovered that “the conservative fundamentalist Baptist would actually be willing to shake hands with the lesbian Wiccan, as long as it was over a bag of locally grown carrots.” We read this as a Baptist-Wiccan-carrot-assemblage, in which all actors learn to be affected together.

But is the OFC selling out their core values as they grow? If we have decided to abandon the role of critical evaluators producing knowledge *of* this assemblage, we propose instead to merge with this hybrid collective, to offer our services as researchers, mediators. How then might we contribute to the process?

Bringing our reading of will to power and the HRC to a PAR phase of the project maintains a focus on the collection of affects, capacities and drives that produce and emerge from the relations between a vast range of actors. Like Foucault’s “network of pleasures and powers,” that we mentioned earlier, this approach begins with the notion that it is in the

multiplicity of these assemblages that both the challenges and paths forward are to be found.

Secondly, as this is a genealogy of an *actor-network*, we focus not only on human actors, but the myriad non-human actors that participate in the ongoing production of the OFC. Previous research, for example, called attention to an unlikely supporting actor, the ice chest. These humble devices perform many crucial functions in the OFC: they keep perishable items cold, they work to organize items within the different sections of the distribution center according to their ultimate destination, and they provide customers with a system for locating their items at pickup sites. Ice chests are important for two reasons: costs associated with their frequent disappearance serve to strengthen discourses of efficiency and becoming more “business-like,” with potential impacts on OFC functions that may vary from member to member. Secondly, they require a great deal of personal interaction between members at every step along the way. Many of these ice chests are too large to lift individually, and require coordinated efforts between members to be moved. Interpreting the ice chests’ wills to power, like those of the Wiccans, Baptists and carrots, illustrates that understanding the shifting power relations of any food assemblage requires us to interpret the relations between human and non-human actors in our analyses.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have outlined an interwoven theory and practice of a politics of possibility and proposed a methodology for enacting this politics by merging with the OFC in a HRC that learns to be affected alongside a range of diverse actors. To inform this project, we read both Foucault’s *and* Latour’s work as fundamental to a critical analysis of power relations that multiplies points of intervention, rather than relying on the power ‘held’ by certain actors to

explain a given assemblage. We elaborated further on this point by considering how Nietzsche's conception of the will to power draws out the generative power of difference itself, and suggests an intentional stance towards difference in our research not as something to be simply critiqued or overcome, but as a key resource in overcoming obstacles and overcoming ourselves – in becoming-other-*with*-others, with explicit attention to both human and more-than-human actors.

Such an emphasis on the never-ending negotiation of interdependent difference may foreclose utopian or strictly egalitarian visions of food provision, but in doing so it opens up innumerable lines of flight towards that allow us to consider and meet the needs and desires of a broader range of actors. With whom, and *what*, can we learn as we move forward?

This is an open question. In approaching it, we find it helpful to consider Liz Grosz's discussion of Nietzsche's work, in which she reminds us that

“(Zarathustra's) animals [an eagle and a snake] advise him to learn from...birds, for whom singing is the highest art...singing and dancing is what allows us to overcome ourselves, the mobilization of the body for joy and for affirmation. This affirmation of joy... isn't about organizing resistance, it's about exploring possibilities that are being left unexplored... [O]nce...revolution [is no longer the goal], what else can we do except to affirm lines of flight that we share collectively, that are possibilities of our own, open-ended action... [W]hat are our weapons, if not a mass rallying, except for joy, singing and dancing. These *are* political.”

- i Mirowski and Nik-Khah 2007, cited in Barnes 2008:1444
- ii Gibson-Graham xxxx
- iii JKG 2010
- iv Latour 2005:86
- v *ibid*, pg. 21
- vi Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 55
- vii *ibid*, pg 46
- viii Deleuze 1983
- ix Latour 2005 pg. 86 (emphasis added)