



Heterogeneities_{DOT}net

Comment on Suchman, and Gherardi and Nicolini: Knowing as Displacing

John Law

ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change,
Department of Sociology,
Faculty of Social Sciences,
The Open University, Walton Hall,
Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK
(j.law@open.ac.uk)

This paper was originally published as:

John Law (2000), 'Comment on Suchman, and Gherardi and Nicolini: Knowing as Displacing, Organization, 7 (2), 349-354. Please refer to the original publication for the definitive text.

This version was published by heterogeneities.net on 28th December 2011 at
<http://www.heterogeneities.net/publications/Law2000CommentOnSuchmanGherardiNicolini.pdf>.

Please acknowledge and cite any use of this on-line publication.

In their use of actor-network theory, the articles by Lucy Suchman and Silvia Gherardi and Davide Nicolini imply that it might be helpful to press on this metaphor: *knowing is an enactment*.

We can imagine this empirically. One version of knowing about safety failures on an Italian building site is a enactment which includes an inspector, a foreman, a report and some scaffolding that isn't quite right. Knowledge of an error, and how to remedy it, is performed into being in the course of a negotiation. Again, one version of knowing about the best bridge design in California is a team making a presentation to a town meeting, a meeting that includes experts, lay people, overhead transparencies, an exhibition, pictures, drawings and texts. It is a way of producing knowledge of the best possible design.

We can also imagine enactment—and these particular performances—theoretically. For instance, we might imagine an enactment as something, an occasion in a location, a set of actions with a series of effects. If we were to press this we might suggest that an enactment on the one hand produces an *object*, something known or known about. And then, on the other hand, it produces a subject, something or someone that does the knowing that corresponds to what is to be known.

This turn to enactment is more or less explicit in actor-network theory and other post-structuralisms, for instance in feminist writing (e.g. Butler, 1990). The assumption is not that enactments are deliberate and motivated performances (though sometimes they might be in part). Instead it is that knowledges and the objects that they know may be understood as being produced together. Understood in this way, some features of enactments include the following:

- they take place in particular *locations*. Here the issue is: will the same enactment work somewhere else? The answer is, perhaps it will, perhaps it won't. And in any case, whether it is 'the same' enactment if the location is different is also a matter for debate. Feminists call this 'situ-

ated knowledge'. Actor-network writers often talk about tests or trials, 'épreuves', which means that they are **processes**, inseparable from practice. They go on, they don't stand still, and they have to be uncertainly repeated if they are to continue producing knower and known.

- they are **materially heterogeneous**, including documents, devices, people and money, as noted by Silvia Gherardi and Davide Nicolini (though some knowing enactments, for instance of God or love, might be performed without too many documents or devices). This actor-network claim also means that knowing is not tied to any particular location: in the head, on a spreadsheet, in the skills of bricklayers, in a text, within a machine, on the tip of the tongue, across an organization, knowing is a relational moment or an effect, not a substance.
- neither, and correspondingly, do they tie us to any particular view of the **character** of knowing. Perhaps we can say that the knower orients towards the known, 'recognizes' it, and acts towards it. That there is some kind of an interaction, a chain of links, between knower and known. But that is all. Tacit skills, formal algorithms, pictures or visual depictions, talk, emotions, aesthetic appreciation or repugnance, a sense of the spiritual—all can be imagined as enactments or knowing effects.

In this version of knowing, the *epistemological* (issues to do with knowing or knowing well) is bound up with the *ontological* (the question of what exists). What is, as well as the knowledge of what is, are produced together. A caution: this does not mean that anything goes, that any old world or reality can be enacted into being. For instance, Lucy Suchman describes the constraints which make the performances of bridge-building or their design convincing—but also very demanding and difficult. Geography and topology, economics, aesthetics, engineering practices, organizational arrangements, all these and many more limit-but also secure—the possibility of a successful enactment. Actor-network theory and related approaches remind us that it is not enough to fantasize. It is also necessary to make links, enrol allies, and undertake what is sometimes called heterogeneous engineering.

What, then, is *known in an* enactment? Above I suggested that the knower orients towards what is known, 'recognizes' it, and acts towards it, and I also suggested that knowing comes in many forms. But now we hit a complication. This is because the sensibility encouraged by an actor-network approach suggests that *everything* is known. What does this mean?

In one form this sometimes turns up as a methodological problem: 'but where does the network stop?' The answer is: 'nowhere'. And as they are bound to if they reflect an actor-network sensibility, both the papers illustrate this. Thus if designing a bridge means mobilizing engineering knowledge then we could, if we were so minded, trace the links, the connections, the performances all the way back to the establishment of pro-

fessional engineering in the United States and beyond. In a different context a recent book by Kathryn Henderson does just this. Specific engineering drafting decisions are revealed to reflect different cultures—for instance of computing on the one hand, and drawing office practices on the other. These themselves did not arise *ab initio* but reflect the developing institutionalization of professional engineering, and various power struggles for control of engineering involving entrepreneurs, government and professional associations (see Henderson, 1999). In short, the possible attachments ramify out endlessly. And what is true for engineering design is just as much the case for safety procedures. If getting approval for corrections to breaches of safety on a building site means that legal procedure is mobilized, then we could trace all the performances that produced the Italian legal system and civil service back to the year dot.

The sensibility that everything is known is also a point of principle. This says that in the elements assembled together to make an enactment, and in the shape of the enactment itself, *everything is already there*. The performances of Lucy Suchman's bridge design teams in the public meetings (or in the design office, or in the city hall) **include** absolutely everything. The ways in which they produce knowing and objects to be known incorporate all the arrangements, political, professional, economic, cultural, that have formed engineering and its road-building and consultation and so on. The objects and the subjects performed into being all reflect a proliferating ramification of attachments.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the philosophers have been there first. The argument I'm making is that any enactment may be imagined as a monad where everything that produced it, that went into its production, is in one way or another included and reflected within its consciousness. Leibniz:

... now this *connexion* or adaptation of all created things with each, and of each with all the rest, means that each simple substance has relations which express all the others, and consequently it is a perpetual living mirror of the universe.'

Our enacted 'actor-networks' also mirror everything. They are 'actor-worlds' if we know how to read them. Leibniz adds that the monad 'knows' everything, but that it does not necessarily know it very well or in very much detail:

In a confused way [monads] all go towards the infinite, towards the whole; but they are limited and distinguished from one another by the degrees of their distinct perceptions.³

The issue, then, is to know what to make of the relation between the fact of reaching confusedly to the infinite on the one hand, and the suggestion, again by Leibniz, that any monad (better might be 'monad-enactment')

... can only be distinct as regards a small part of things; that is to say as regards those which are either the nearest or the largest in relation to each of the monads.⁴

Leibniz thus suggests a way of distinguishing between two forms of knowing in particular monad-enactments. We might call these 'knowing-as-obscure' and 'knowing-as-distinct'. 'Knowing-as-obscure' is, however, also 'knowing-as-being-shaped', which suggests that it is not necessarily inferior and that, like the poor, it is always with us.

What an actor-network sensibility does is to extend 'distinct' into terrain previously occupied by 'shaping/obscure' in a particular way. It is also concerned with how making-distinct is made and unmade. Thus Michel Callon explores the constitution of markets with their independent subjects (buyers and sellers) and objects (commodities) (Callon, 1998a and b). His question is how these are rendered distinct. Since entanglement (obscure) is, so to speak, the state of nature, it is a considerable achievement to render things distinct enough to allow 'simple' economic calculations and transactions. Such is economic learning. But the separation between knowing-by-making-distinct and knowing-as-shaping/obscure is also porous and the framing which holds the two apart is always (as he puts it) overflowing.

Callon also argues that neo-classical economic theory is crucial in producing (something that sometimes begins to approximate to) neo-classical performance in practice. But the argument can be transferred to organization theory. As everyone knows, there is an endless circulation of metaphors between organizations and organization theory. The difference between the two cases is, perhaps, that neo-classical economists sometimes profess to think that they have discovered a social state of nature (though the real working of markets is a constant counterdemonstration) whereas organizational theory knows otherwise, moving from one form of knowing-as-making-distinct to another, recognizing that no particular distinctions will last very long.

There is a cynical reading: organization theory displaces itself because (unlike neo-classical economics) it knows that knowing-as-obscure/shaping will quickly show that any particular form of knowing-as-distinct is like the emperor's new clothes. A less cynical reading is that it is an appropriately modest model of organizational learning. This is the distinct and ironical recognition that knowing-as-distinct is always surrounded by knowing-as-obscure/shaping which exceeds its distinctions, and then overflows them. Perhaps this suggests the need for a further model of knowing as enactment, that of *knowing-as-displacing*: namely, the distinct—or explicit—enactment of different-knowing-as-distinctions in different locations.

In one way this is an old trope in organization theory, going back at least as far as Gareth Morgan's *Images of Organization* (1986). In other ways, however, I think that it is new. Organizational knowledge, and models of organizational learning, are and will be lumpy, irreducible to the singularities of particular forms of knowing-as-distinct. The actor-network approach has sometimes read itself—or been read—as singularity, but as studies such as the two in question here suggest, this is a

mistake. By contrast, if we take knowing-as-displacing seriously, then we are confronted with a new set of problems: how the different enactments of knowing (and their corresponding realities) are related together.

For many the answer offered by Leibniz, which assumes a deity who takes pleasure in justice, order and perfection, won't do. Such would be a further form of convergent knowing-as-distinction (as in neo-classical economics' image of itself). Instead we are confronted with problems of coordination between different, displaced, knowing-as-distinctions. And, as Annemarie Mol has clearly shown for the case of medical decision-making and its many performances, though this can't be summarized and rendered distinct in a single knowing-as-distinction, neither does it take the form of a happy pluralism where different subjects, objects and realities simply do their own thing (Mol, forthcoming). This is because each performance of knowing-as-distinction *includes* the other performances—this is precisely what knowing-by-obscurety/shaping is all about. So what is the nature of that inclusion? Possibilities explored by Mol include:

- *consistency* this arises when two knowledges and two realities are successfully enacted as neatly dovetailing together—as, for instance, in the case of the public bridge-design presentations when the listeners were steered away from certain economic and technical solutions;
- *inconsistency* obviously this is when consistency is not achieved, and disagreement or lack of fit is made manifest—a case that is perhaps visible at certain early stages in the building inspection, the point until a reality acceptable to all is enacted.
- *non-coherence*: this arises when two knowledges and two realities don't seem to have much to do with one another and the worlds they make apparently pass each other by—a case not very obviously manifested in either of the two examples (though it could perhaps be discovered), if only because studies of explicit decision-making work towards knowing-as-distinction, which tends to reduce non-coherence to consistency or inconsistency.
- finally, there is what one might think of as *distinct inclusion* as opposed to general 'obscure inclusion'; this arises when one world is clear that it indeed includes another—as, for instance, when the world of the foreman on the building site is re-enacted to include the world of the Italian legal system.

So there are at least four possibilities—and then, to be sure, the complexity increases since they can and do combine in a variety of ways.

As I have tried to suggest, knowing-as-displacing, inclusion, and the coordination of realities which follow from it are issues that arise in the

as-distinction to knowing-as-obscurety/shaping before leaving us with the need to wrestle with knowing-as-displacing. For the latter recognizes its limits, its partialities, its mutual inclusions with other enactments. With this it recognizes that its subjects and objects are no longer fixed but are better understood as shifting and elusive processes.

Notes

A number of friends and colleagues have helped me to think about performativity and displacement. Important among these have been Michel Callon. Annemarie Mol, Ingunn Moser and Vicky Singleton.

1. Recent writing in the actor-network tradition suggests that the term 'network' is too rigid and there is a need for other metaphors for translation or association. Though this is very important (and indeed connected with the present argument) I'll leave this issue on one side here. For a collection of papers which deal with this issue see John Law and John Hassard (1999).
2. Part of section 56 of the *Monadology*, Leibniz (1973), p. 187.
3. Part of section 60 of the *Monadology*, Leibniz (1973), p. 188.
4. Part of section 60 of the *Monadology*, Leibniz (1973), p. 188.

References

- Butler, Judith (1990) 'Gender Rouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity', in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) *Thinking Gender*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Callon, Michel (1998a) 'An Essay on Framing and Overflowing: Economic Externalities Revisited by Sociology', in Michel Callon (ed.) *The Laws of the Markets*, pp. 244-69. Oxford and Keele: Blackwell and the *Sociological Review*.
- Callon, Michel (1998b) 'Introduction: the Embeddedness of Economic Markets in Economics', in Michel Callon (ed.) *The Laws of the Markets*. pp. 1-57. Oxford and Keele: Blackwell and the *Sociological Review*.
- Henderson, Kathryn (1999) *On Line and On Paper: Visual Representations, Visual Culture, and Computer Graphics in Design Engineering*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press.
- Law, John and Hassard, John, eds (1999) *Actor Network Theory and After*. Oxford and Keele: Blackwell and the *Sociological Review*.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm (1973) 'Monadology', in *Philosophical Writings*, pp. 179-94. London: J.M. Dent.
- Mol, Annemarie (forthcoming 2001) *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Morgan, Gareth (1986) *Images of Organization*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.