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A reader's guide to the "ontological turn" – Part 4

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By Annemarie Mol

Editor's note: In the wake of all the [discussion about the 'ontological turn'](#) at this year's American Anthropological Association conference, we asked four scholars, "which texts or resources would you recommend to a student or colleague interested in the uses of 'ontology' as an analytical category in recent work in anthropology and science and technology studies?" This was the answer we received from [Annemarie Mol](#), professor of Anthropology of the Body at the University of Amsterdam. Answers from [Judith Farquhar](#), [Javier Lezaun](#), and [Morten Axel Pedersen](#) appear as separate posts in the series.

The point of the use of the word 'ontology' in STS was that it allowed us not just to talk about the *methods* that were used in the sciences, but (in relation to these) also address what the sciences made of their *object*. E.g. rather than asking whether or not some branch of science knows 'women' correctly, or instead with some kind of bias, we wanted to shift to the question: what are the topics, the concerns and the questions that knowledge practices insist on; how do they interfere in practices; what do they do to/with women; etc. At first this was cast in constructivist terms as 'what do various scientific provinces *make of* women'. But then we began to doubt whether 'making' was such a good metaphor, as it gives some 'maker' too much credit; as it suggests a time line with a before and an after; and materials out of which x or y might be made. So we shifted terminology and used words like *perform*, or *do*, or *enact*. Here we widened the idea of the staging of social realities (e.g. identities) to that of physical realities.

The idea was that there are not just many ways of *knowing* 'an object', but rather many ways of *practising* it. Each way of practising stages – performs, does, enacts – a different *version* of 'the' object. Hence, it is not 'an object', but more than one. An object multiple. That reality might be multiple goes head on against the Euroamerican tradition in which different people may each have their own *perspective* on reality, while there is only *one* reality – singular, coherent, elusive – to have

'perspectives' *on.* To underline our break with this monorealist heritage of monotheism, we imported the old fashioned philosophical term of ontology and put it in the plural. Ontologies. That was – at the time – an unheard of oxymoron.

Crucial in all this was the work of Donna Haraway (even if she did not particularly use the word ontology). Read it all – or pick out what seems interesting to you. Here, now. But if you don't quite know where to start, plunge into Primate Visions.

Crucial, too, was earlier STS work on methods that had recast these as techniques of staging a world (not just of objects, but also of tools, money, readers, investors, etc.). Here Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law worked in ways that later fed into the 'ontology' stream. See for that particular history: Annemarie Mol, "Actor-Network Theory: Sensitive Terms and Enduring Tensions."

The branches of STS from which studies into ontology grew, took themselves as shifting the anthropological gaze from 'the others' to the sciences, scienced that staged themselves as universal, but weren't. They were variously situated techno-science practices and making them travel was hard work. "Show me a universal and I will ask how much it costs," wrote Bruno Latour, (in Irréductions, the second part of The Pasteurisation of France) Hence, going out in the world to study 'others' while presuming 'the West' (or at least (its) science) was rational, coherent, naturalist, what have you – seemed a bad idea to us. The West could do with some thorough unmasking – and taking this to what many saw as pivotal to its alleged superiority, its truth machines, seemed a good idea (even if a lot later some of the techniques involved were highjacked by climate change deniers…).

But there were also always specific relevant interventions to be made. For instance, if ontology is not singular and given, the question arises about *which* reality to 'do'. Ontology does not precede or escape politics, but has a politics of its own. Not a politics of *who* (who gets to speak; act; etc.) but a politics of *what* (what is the reality that takes shape and that various people come to live with?) See: A. Mol, "Ontological politics. A word and some questions," (in Law & Hassard, *Actor Network Theory and After*).

For a longer and more extensive opening up of ontologies / realities (in the plural), well, there is my book *The body multiple: Ontology in medical practice* (Duke University Press 2003) – that lays it all out step by step… Including the difficult aspect of ontological multiplicity that while there is more reality than one, its different versions are variously entangled with one another, so that there are less than many. (As Donna Haraway put it; and as explored by Marilyn Strathern in Partial Connections)

For an earlier use of the term ontological that makes its relevance clear and lays out how realities being done may change over time: Cussins, Charis. "Ontological choreography: Agency through objectification in infertility clinics." *Social studies of science* 26, no. 3 (1996): 575-610. Later reworked in Thompson Charis, Making Parents: The Ontological Choreography of Reproductive Technologies.

For an early attempt to differentiate the semiotics involved from the symbolic interactionist tradition and its perspectives see: Mol, Annemarie, and Jessica Mesman. "Neonatal food and the politics of theory: some questions of method." *Social Studies of Science* 26, no. 2 (1996): 419-444.

The politics at stake come out very well in Ingunn Moser: "Making Alzheimer's disease matter. Enacting, interfering and doing politics of nature." *Geoforum* 39, no. 1 (2008): 98-110.

And for the haunting question as to what/who acts and/or what/who is enacted, see: Mol, Annemarie, and John Law. "Embodied action, enacted bodies: the example of hypoglycaemia." *Body & Society* 10, no. 2-3 (2004): 43-62.

If you like realities as they get tied up with techniques, this is an exciting one, as it multiplies what it is to give birth: Akrich, Madeleine, and Bernike Pasveer. "Multiplying obstetrics: techniques of surveillance and forms of coordination." *Theoretical medicine and bioethics* 21, no. 1 (2000): 63-83.

Remember, the multiplicity of reality does not imply its plurality. Here is a great example of that, a study that traces the task of coordinating between different versions of reality in the course of an operation: Moreira, Tiago. "Heterogeneity and coordination of blood pressure in neurosurgery." *Social Studies of Science* 36, no. 1 (2006): 69-97.

But if different versions of 'an object' may be enacted in practice, this is not to say that they are always fused at some point into 'an object' – they may never quite get to hang together. For a good case of that, see: Law, John, and Vicky Singleton. "Object lessons." *Organization* 12, no. 3 (2005): 331-355.

And here an obligatory one for anthropologists, as the 'object' being studied – and multiplied – is a 'population' as defined by genetics in practice: M'charek, Amâde. "Technologies of population: Forensic DNA testing practices and the making of differences and similarities." *Configurations* 8, no. 1 (2000): 121-158.

Oh, and I should not forget this troubling of 'perspectives' that went beyond realities to also include appreciations: Pols, Jeannette. "Enacting

appreciations: beyond the patient perspective." *Health Care Analysis* 13, no. 3 (2005): 203-221.

More recently, there was a special issue of Social Studies of Science to do with ontologies. It has a good introduction: Woolgar, Steve, and Javier Lezaun. "The wrong bin bag: A turn to ontology in science and technology studies?." *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 3 (2013): 321-340. In it, you may want to read: Law, John, and Marianne Elisabeth Lien. "Slippery: Field notes in empirical ontology." *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 3 (2013): 363-378.

And if you are still hungry for ontologies, then there is (with the example of eating and with norms explicitly added to 'onto'): Mol, Annemarie. "Mind your plate! The ontonorms of Dutch dieting." *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 3 (2013): 379-396.

All of which is not to say that I would want to argue for such a thing as a 'turn to ontology' in anthropology or anywhere else. In the branch of the social studies of science, technology and medicine that I come from this term, ontology, has served quite specific purposes. It has helped to put some issues and questions on the agenda. But of course, like all terms, it has its limits. For it evokes 'reality' better than other things deserving our attention – norms, processes, spatialities, dangers, pleasures: what have you…

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