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## Book Review

**Robert A. Beauregard, Planning Matter: Acting with Things, University of Chicago Press, 2015; ISBN: 978-0-226-29739-2; 256 pp.**

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In Planning Matter Robert Beauregard explores the contribution of actor-network theory (ANT) to the study and practice of planning. This is a difficult task since ANT is not a theory in the traditional sense, that can be applied to phenomena and render explanations. Perhaps, it is best described as a method that informs a relational understanding of specific situations. It is also a tricky task because it implies seeing a modern discipline through the lens of a literature that claims ‘we have never been modern’ (Latour, 1993). Beauregard (1989; 1991) has long grappled with the tension between post-modern theory and modern planning, and in this book, he concentrates on a non-modern challenge. Instead of a seemingly head-on collision (Chapter 1), the book describes a productive encounter that provides insight into planning’s post-modern tensions. ANT can inspire planners ‘[to] become moral agents deeply entangled with the material world’ (p. 226) and, in an unexpected manner, help modern planning to become relevant again today.

ANT is a body of work that emerged out of the ‘science wars’ between the perspectives of scientific realism and social constructionism in the late twentieth century. Sociologists of science formed a third position in this debate, describing the production of scientific knowledge as a negotiation between humans, technology and nature. Scientific facts, ANT scholars argued, are not discovered or constructed but carefully assembled through the association of social and material elements. More generally, in their view the world is made up of heterogeneous networks that are formed, negotiated and maintained in concrete sites of practice. To emphasize these two core tenets of the networked character of practice and the distributed character of agency, ANT has sometimes been called a sociology of circulation and translation (Callon, 1984). The central question, in the sense of translation, is not who

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acts but how do some actors overcome the resistance of others to speak on their behalf in many places.

It is only recently that the relational and material considerations of ANT have found their way into the study of planning. The work of the geographer Jonathan Murdoch (2006) has been instrumental in this respect. Although some of the essays reproduced in *Planning Matter* have been at the forefront, the book is not the first to introduce ANT insights into planning. Rydin (2014) has indeed discussed ANT in connection with an unfolding material turn in planning theory. Boelens (2009), moreover, has explored some of the practical relevance of ANT for planning. Still, *Planning Matter* is a highly relevant and unique contribution to this debate. Inspired by ANT, its objective is to add to the history of planning a 'third materialism' that follows up on the 'naïve materialism' of early modern planners and the historical materialism of progressive planners in the 1970s. In this light, Beauregard's objective is to substitute the respective determinism and idealism of the latter with a pragmatism capable of fulfilling the 'promise of planning' (Chapter 9).

Consequently, Beauregard's goal is 'to craft an understanding of planning that brings theorists and practitioners closer to the material world they wish to change' (p. 3). He develops this understanding in eleven essays. Although they can be read independently, their connection is insightful. The essays are preceded by an introductory text which states the book's theoretical inspirations and its practical aspiration. Beauregard's reading of ANT is primarily influenced by the writings of Bruno Latour, and he explains that two of Latour's articles, on non-human agency (1992) and the role of critique (2004), have been particularly influential. The sequence of the essays reflects this influence, it shifts from an analytical interest in the symmetry between humans and nonhumans, to a pragmatic stance on the 'promise of the [planning] profession' (p. 113), understood as helping humans live well together with their environment. Overall, the book presents a well-crafted dialogue that introduces abstract concepts possibly new to some readers, and demonstrates their relevance in concrete planning situations. Readers familiar with ANT will find this dialogue interesting too since it still leaves room for readers to judge themselves the significance of ANT insights for planning.

In the opening essay, the conceptual starting point for the dialogue between ANT and planning is 'ontographies.' They are presented as lists that emphasize the many possible connections between the listed items more than their unitary coherence. Beauregard likens these lists to the open engagement of ANT, and in turn contrasts both to planning. This introduction of ANT by way of ontographies might be puzzling to readers new to its outlook, and surprising for those familiar with its attention to actual situations. Yet once they are fully discussed, the parallel with ANT becomes intelligible and their contrast to planning becomes apparent. Where ontographies and ANT emphasize heterogeneous, contingent and expansive entities, planning values order, coherence and completeness. Since 'An ontographic planner would be an oxymoron' (p. 31), Beauregard seems to prepare the reader for a confrontation. He nuances this though by stating that 'while planning is neither ontographic nor singular, the ways to do planning are many, but not unbounded' (p. 34). The extent to which ANT does provoke planning is the topic of the subsequent seven essays on talk, artefacts, sites, responsibilities, possibilities, obduracy and temporalities.

The essays develop an overall understanding of planning in terms of material actors and networked practices. Chapter 3 illustrates this well, highlighting how planning artefacts participate in planning deliberations and so shape planning action. This material agency is extended to the sites of planning practice in Chapter 4. Central to Chapter 2 and 5 through 8 is the thickening of planning networks as a function of the associations created through

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discourse and practice, over time. As examples of theoretical concepts, this first set of essays relies on the existing planning literature. This means that the essays do not feature the kind of ethnographic work and thick-descriptions foregrounded by ANT. As a result, the essays are more illustrations of ANT insights based on planning examples than demonstrations of the ANT approach with case studies. This kind of 'bricolage' is also present in the conceptual vocabulary that draws on post-modern planning theory (Chapter 2 and 4), public ethics (Chapter 5), literary studies (Chapter 6), and political geography (Chapter 7).

Still, this theoretical and empirical assembling fits the purpose of the book and serves its arguments well. It makes for a very original and insightful re-consideration of some important planning debates. After all, Beauregard's aim is not to develop a new actor-network theory of planning but, as he notes, '[to] offer a sensibility, not a formal argument' (p. 10). In this way, one understands how, in a very atypical ANT fashion, Beauregard's approach can be 'unashamedly normative' (p. 11). His concern is not only the mattering of a planning theory, in terms of accounting for the material things, but also the mattering of a planning practice; which he claims to be 'diminished' in the United States (p. 172). Accordingly, the last three chapters are part of a second set of essays in which the descriptive mode of ANT is substituted for a prescriptive planning approach. That material things mediate planning practice is the central ANT inspiration in Chapter 9 on how planners find out the issues in need of planning attention. That action and reality take shape in networks is the basis for Chapter 10 on the role of planning scholars as public intellectuals.

The final chapter however, deviates from the latter ANT inspired suggestions with an essay entitled 'Planning will always be modern.' This essay will surprise those familiar with the non-modern character of ANT as well as the readers that followed the book's sequential order. After provoking planning with an ontographic and non-modern ANT lens, in this final chapter Beauregard revisits its main implications. He argues that the modern separation of humans and nonhumans, society and nature, politics and science is what has given and continues to give planning its legitimacy as an institutional practice. While planning and its 'promise' (Chapter 9) can benefit from engaging more with the material world, a non-modern mode of planning, according to Beauregard, will lose planning's modern response-ability of making places and lives better for humans.

This surprising conclusion deserves further reflection. A seminal ANT study describes how translation (as described above) is always transformation and sometimes even 'treason' (Callon, 1984). Planning Matter translates ANT concepts, carefully and craftily, in an attempt to speak on their behalf in the context of planning studies. That this can be tricky and possibly treacherous, is recognized by Beauregard: 'It might thus seem like intellectual suicide to reject one of his [Latour's] main tenets and now claim that city planning not only is still modern but is likely to always be so' (p. 213). Yet, he reminds us again that he is 'less interested in settling on truth (in the correspondence sense) than in exploring ideas and their limits' (p. 224). Still, it does seem that he attributes considerable resistance to planning in his translation. Specifically, he argues that '[The modernist] qualities of the planning profession cannot be changed without wholly erasing what we mean by planning' (p. 225). In a way, this does not set him apart from the progressive planners to whom his 'third materialism' is intended as a reply. They, and Beauregard himself, 'seem as reluctant as mainstream planners to shift planning away from its core activities' (p. 56).

Planning Matter is a significant contribution to a growing planning literature that seeks to add material things to planning deliberations that are usually considered the arena of humans only. It presents a careful consideration and clear illustrations of the opportunities and limitations of

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seeing planning in a non-modern light. Moreover, it is comprehensive in offering an ANT view on the various dimensions of planning and ambitious in pushing this view into the realm of practice. As such, the book is a useful introduction of the main tenets of ANT into planning thought, and a primer for those interested in exploring the materiality of planning in their (doctoral) research. It is above all, a welcome contribution to the unfolding material turn in planning theory.

At the same time, the essays in this book are not ANT case studies and therefore do not demonstrate its distinct methodology. Once readers have taken an interest in the new directions Beauregard points at, they will need to follow up with other literature (see for example Murdoch, 2006; Latour, 2005). The provocations in the book are thus important pointers for further research on the mediating role of material things in planning. In particular, Beauregard's identification of the limits of ANT and the resistances of planning can be a productive starting point for future studies. It seems that Beauregard settles on a (modern) definition of planning early on in his essays (Chapter 2 and 6). In an ANT case study, Latour (2005) recommends, 'the task of explaining starts only after a profound suspicion has been introduced about the very existence of the objects accounted for' (p. 102). Accordingly, instead of trying to understand 'what planning is and is not' (p. 173), a potentially different definition of planning could emerge out of the ethnographic study of planning. Although this kind of research that traces the relations of 'obdurate' (p. 146) planning assemblages and their very definitions in actual practices is time consuming, it is also the kind that young academics have the luxury of doing.

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