Agential Realism (and ANT)

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Terms and conditions apply

• I make no claims to be an expert on either Agential Realism or ANT
• My aim is to provide a sympathetic, but critical, account of Agential Realism as a basis for discussion
  • and to identify similarities and differences with ANT
• All quotes are from Barad (except where indicated otherwise)
Agential realism

• Karen Barad
  • draws on
    • Feminism
    • Quantum physics
      • Philosophy physics of Niels Bohr
    • Science studies
    • Post-colonial theory
    • (post) Marxist theory
    • Poststructuralist theory
• “Contributes to the founding of a new ontology, epistemology and ethics” (2007: 25)
Key concepts

- phenomena
- intra-action
- apparatus
- agential cut
- posthumanist
- agency
- performativity
- causality
Phenomena

• “the primary epistemological unit is not independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties but rather phenomena” (2003: 815)
• “are ontologically primitive relations – relations without preexisting relata” (2003: 815)
• “are produced through agential intra-actions of multiple apparatuses of bodily production” (2003: 817)
• “are constitutive of reality”
  • “reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but “things”-in-phenomena” (2003: 817)
Intra-action

- cf interaction (“presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata”) (2003: 815)
- “signifies “the inseparability of “objects” and “agencies of observation”” (1998: 96)
- “It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the “components” of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful” (2003: 815)
- “enacts agential separability—the local condition of exteriority-within-phenomena” (2003: 815)
Apparatus(es)

- “not preexisting or fixed entities; they are themselves constituted through particular practices that are perpetually open to rearrangements, rearticulations, and other reworkings” (1998: 102)
- Their “materialization is an open (but non-arbitrary) temporal process: apparatuses do not simply change in time, they materialize through time” (1998:102)
- “not static laboratory setups, but a dynamic set of open-ended practices iteratively refined and reconfigured” (2007: 167)
- “are dynamic (re)configurings of the world” (2003: 816)
- “are specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted” (2003: 816)
- “are themselves phenomena” (2003: 816)
Posthumanist

• “incorporates important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors” (2003: 808)
• “calls into question the givenness of the differential categories of “human” and “nonhuman,” examining the practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized” (2003: 808)
• “does not fix the boundary between “human” and “nonhuman” before the analysis ever gets off the ground but rather enables (indeed demands) a genealogical analysis of the discursive emergence of the “human.”” (2003: 821)
Agency

• “not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity” (2003: 826)
• “an enactment, not something that someone or something has” (2003: 826)
• “not an attribute of “subjects” or “objects” (as they do not preexist as such)” (2003: 827)
• “an enactment of iterative changes to particular practices ... through the dynamics of intra-activity” (2007: 178)
• “Agential realism theorizes agency in a way that acknowledges that there is a sense in which "the world kicks back" (i.e., nonhuman and cyborgian forms of agency in addition to human ones) without assuming some innocent, symmetrical form of interaction between knower and known” (1999: 2)
Performativity

• cf representationalism
  • “shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices/doings/actions” (2003: 802)
• has a “politically important – arguably inherently queer – genealogy” (2003: 807)
• “iterative intra-activity” (2003: 828)
Agential cut

• “enacts a local resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy” (2003: 815)
• “enacts a local causal structure among “components” of a phenomenon in the marking of the “measuring agencies” (“effect”) by the “measured object” (“cause”)” (2003: 815)
Causality

• is neither a matter of strict determinism, nor one of free will.
• “Intra-actions will always entail particular exclusions, and exclusions foreclose the possibility of determinism, providing the conditions for an open future. But neither are anything and everything possible at any given moment. Indeed intra-actions reconfigure what is possible and what is impossible.” (2007: 177)
• “One way to mark this might be to say that intra-actions are constraining, but not determining. But … possibilities aren't narrowed in their realization; new possibilities open up as others that might have been possible are now excluded” (2007: 177)
The framework (Barad, 1996: 179-183)

• Agential realism grounds and situates knowledge claims in local experiences: objectivity is literally embodied
  • knowledge is always a view from somewhere - objective knowledge is situated knowledge

• Agential realism privileges neither the material nor the cultural: the apparatus of bodily production is material-cultural, and so is agential reality
  • nature has agency, but it does not speak itself to the patient, unobtrusive observer listening for its cries - there is an important asymmetry with respect to agency: we do the representing
  • nature is not a passive blank slate awaiting our inscriptions
  • to privilege the material or the discursive is to forget the inseparability that characterizes phenomena.
• Agential realism entails the interrogation of boundaries and critical reflexivity
  • boundaries are necessary for making meanings
  • boundaries are interested instances of power, specific constructions, with real material consequences

• Agential realism underlines the necessity of an ethics of knowing
  • Knowledge projects entail the drawing of boundaries, the production of phenomena which are material-cultural intra-actions
cf ANT

- origins in semiotics
- strong symmetry
- flat ontology
- relationality
- actualism
- [performativity]
“Problems for sociomateriality arising from Agential Realism” (Leonardi, 2013)

- Lack of explanatory power (of empirical phenomena)
  - Conflation of realms of action and structure precludes an examination of “becoming” and shifts the focus to what “is,” which leads to descriptive studies
- Inability to perform empirical studies that actually demonstrate “sociomateriality”
  - Empirical operationalization forces scholars to define, at least implicitly, what is “material” in the context they are studying, which decouples a phenomenon that would otherwise be “sociomaterial.”
• Overlooks how practices are sustained and changed
  • Absence of a theory of temporality due to conflation of social and material
• Treats all relations as mutually constitutive or co-dependent
  • Reliance on a thesis of “interpenetration” and a conceptualization of the social and the material as internal relations
Issues with Agential Realism

• Radical indeterminacy
• Scale
  • “Has quantum mechanical behaviour ever been observed in the macroscopic domain?” (2007: 279)
• Scope
  • Immediate practice vs “underlying structure”
• “Strong” relationality
  • “Agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements” (2007: 33)
• Esotericism
  • “The world is an ongoing open process of mattering through which “mattering” itself acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities” (2007: 141)
Implications of Agential Realism for InfraGlobe agenda

- The “nature”/“specific features” of digital technology
  - the very idea
- How is technology understood?
  - not a separate category
- How to explain or describe complexity and change
  - Iterative intra-actions are the dynamics through which temporality and spatiality are produced and iteratively reconfigured in the materialisation of phenomena
References

• Leonardi, P.M., 2013. Theoretical foundations for the study of sociomateriality. Information and Organization, 23 (2), 59–76.