

Dario Minervini
**Politica e Rifiuti. Conessioni
 socio-tecniche nella governance
 dell'ambiente**
*(Politics and Waste. Socio-technical
 Connections in Environmental Governance)*
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Being a music lover (and partly a musician), I have always thought that Italian singers and bands suffer from two major problems: a kind of 'subsidiary dependency' on Anglo-American music, together with the need to pay homage to the Italian melodic tradition. If this book were a piece of music, it would escape both. If this book were a piece of music, it would be the first release of a young musician. I want to stress the importance of the word 'musician' here. A musician is a person who is able to convey a concept, to communicate an idea, whatever music genre s/he plays; otherwise, s/he is just a player.

This same ability is clearly recognizable in this book: this is not just an ANT-oriented account of the process leading to the construction of the "Fenice" waste incineration plant in Melfi, in the province of Potenza (Italy). This is a book about the possibility of looking at politics, organization and decision making as the products of the relationships that bind together humans, technologies and natural elements.

What I am trying to say is that on many occasions we listen to a song, a piece of music, that immediately re-

minds us of a particular band or music genre. And that's all. But if this book were a piece of music, it would not simply sound like ANT. It would push a little bit forward the borders of a 'genre' that, although sometimes theoretically celebrated and with a lot of followers in the field of STS, still has some difficulties in finding its audience in the field of political sciences and, more in general, politics. Which is quite strange, given that ANT, as Minervini aptly states referring to Latour (1999), is actually a political theory.

Thus, contrary to the common refrain that ANT does not take 'power' seriously into account, here the description (Akrich, 1987) of the ways in which specific environmental issues enter the political debate highlights how political decision-making is fragmented into an action-net (Czarniawska, 2004) involving what I would label 'negotiations-in-practice'. In the Italian literature there is a well-known antecedent of this way of 'playing' ANT, Tradurre le riforme in pratica ("Translating reforms into practice"), a book edited by Silvia Gherardi and Andrea Lippi in 2000 (the first ANT-oriented book written in Italian). And the approach of Minervini is clearly informed by having listened to (and having taken seriously) the tunes and the whispers of that text, as well as the ANT 'standards' (Callon, Latour, Law...).

The roots of Minervini's work, by the way, are not in STS. The author clearly comes from the area of policy analysis, particularly from the French line of research (Mény and Thoenig, 1989). This means that policies are seen as the non-linear outcome of decisional processes influenced by public

and institutional actors. In this view, action is always 'strategic', but strategy does not necessarily imply rational choice, if not a posteriori (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977).

Similarities and differences between the French school of strategic/bureaucratic analysis and ANT are well depicted in the first chapters of the book. Although both approaches share a common interest in the study of processes of association, cooperation and betrayal (without imposing any particular structure on actors' relations), they differ in their conception of symmetric action. Minervini refers in particular to Friedberg (1993), when (commenting on Callon's work on the Saint Jacques' mussels) he states that the principle of generalized symmetry does not give enough emphasis to the intentionality of human actors: objects (technologies, texts, laws, and so on) are relevant to social action and power relations as long as they are in the hands of intentional actors. The difference between humans and non-humans is thus grounded in the instrumentality of the latter and in the intentionality of the former.

How to reconcile the two approaches?

From a theoretical perspective, the author argues that the main point is that both approaches converge on a processual theory of action/power: ANT takes into consideration how processes of association translate into 'collectives'; strategic analysis looks at stabilisation, at the ways in which power 'takes place' in processes of association and negotiation. "For this same reason – argues Minervini (p. 33) – in strategic analysis the category of power

acquires a clear and visible dimension, contrary to ANT, where power is always in the making, has its effects, but it refers to a coalition of actors/actants in relation to specific, and constantly changing, spatio-temporal configurations".

I must say that this argument is not very convincing. From my point of view, the principle of generalized symmetry is not a minor point and an instrumental approach to objects and technologies immediately reminds me of a sort of predetermined structure regarding relations and associations. However, it is quite common, in my experience, listening to a music piece and not appreciating all the 'solos', which, in this case, is actually a really minor one.

The main solo is in the research account, where the author describes and interprets the making of an environmental policy, adopting both the ANT model proposed by Callon in 1986 (regarding the moments of a translation process) and the one suggested by Latour in 1991 (regarding the study of programs of actions). Here the author gives voice (by making reference to documents and interviews with different groups of actors) and visibility (through the use of numerous schemata) to the logics, the rhetoric, the strategies, and to the very idea of 'politics' and 'environment' as emerging from and within relations.

It would be meaningless to summarize the whole story in a few words. Thus, I prefer to skip directly to some of the final chords offered by Minervini:

- a participatory process does not automatically imply a democratic atti-

tude in decision making: ‘open-ended’ cannot be confused with ‘democratic’;

- the power to define policies is the result of a relational process, not the origin of the policy at stake: looking at power in objectivist terms, as a resource individual actors can mobilize for their own interests, does not account for who, how and when actors acquire the capacity to mobilize resources, and what constitutes a resource in the actors’ perspective;

- sometimes, ANT looks for missing masses, but in this case social actors are missing: why didn’t the trade unions take part in the whole negotiation process?

If this book were a piece of music, as it often happens nowadays, it could be of interest for different audiences. ANT listeners would probably be its ‘natural’ public, but political scientists and environmental sociologists could maybe enjoy it even more, because of the ‘fresh sound’ this book brings into established canons. And social scientists (in general) could find new sounds and dissonances in it that could help them better frame the relationships between humans, technologies and nature.

References

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Objectos Impuros. Experiências em Estudos sobre a Ciência

(*Impure Objects. Science Studies Experiences*)

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Science Studies are today in Portugal a very dynamic field of investigation. Edited by two Portuguese scholars that actively participated in the emergence and development of this research field, the contributions collected in the volume aim at showing how the theoretical and empirical investigation on science practice, objects and institutions in the Portuguese society (a “semi-peripheral society” is the definition given by the authors) “interferes”, through original paths, with the broader international debate.

The interest in studying science and its impact on society is far from being a novelty in Portugal. In fact, the promotion of science and the dissemination of scientific knowledge, as part of a broader process of citizenship-building, have been a crucial component of the movement of opposition to the Estado Novo, the Portuguese authori-