

Response

“We have a situation here!”:

On Enactment as a Middle Ground between Practice and Performance¹

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Enactment in the Post-Actor-Network Theory of Annemarie Mol

“So I need a word that doesn’t suggest too much, a word with not too much of an academic history. The English language has a nice one in store: enact” (Mol 2002, 33). When looking for a word to describe the multiple doings and beings of one disease, post-Actor-Network-theorist Annemarie Mol came up with the concept of “enactment” in her book *the body multiple*, claiming that it had less baggage or discussion connected to it than the concept of “performance”² and a different notion of daily routines as well.³ The term “enactment” was intended to reflect her understanding, that in each practice one might encounter in a hospital—therapy, operation or diagnosis—a slightly different version of disease would be enacted by the situational actants, because the disease is very different depending whether you look at it through a microscope, listen to it through the narrations of patients, or face it in the operating room. As she describes it:

A patient information leaflet might describe atherosclerosis as the gradual obstruction of the arteries, but in hospital practice this one medical condition appears to be many other things. From one moment, place, apparatus, specialty, or treatment, to the next, a slightly different ‘atherosclerosis’ is being discussed, measured, observed, or stripped away. (blurb)

Thus there are multiple diseases enacted that hang together somehow, connected through certain translation processes and practices that make one specific enactment of the disease transportable from one part of the hospital to another.

Actor-Network-Theory (ANT)—which has also been called the Sociology of Translation (cf. Callon 1986)—is concerned with the construction of knowledge and technology not as a singular or linear process but as network (cf. Sørensen 2012, 327). This means less a simple focus on materialities than is often implied. Rather, ANT is about (actor-) networks and situations, or, as Bruno Latour has stated, a view in which “attachments are first, actors are second” (2005, 217). Phenomena and entities are formed only through the interplay of diverse actants. Their potentials and possibilities are only realized in specific human (and non-human) actor networks or interactions. The easiest example to sum up this perspective is the interplay of gun and human. When looking at gun shooting, Bruno Latour asks: Who is firing, the gun

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or the human? The answer to this question also bears on how to prevent gun violence: Should we have stricter restrictions on firearms or should we have more social workers or psychological facilities throughout the country? To argue that the reason for gun shootings is that there are too many guns out there would be techno-deterministic, while arguing that people who have become mentally unstable or violent due to their childhoods or social environments cause gun violence would be socio-deterministic. Thus, Latour argues instead that guns and humans form a situational hybrid that shoots. Only when the potentialities and dispositions of gun and human come together does a shooting occur.

Actor-Network-Theory has been called postconstructivist because it looks at the situation and practices of knowledge or technological production (cf. Degele and Simms 2004, 259). Originating in Science and Technology Studies, it has been widely influential in urban studies (cf. Färber 2014; Farias and Bender 2010), economics (cf. Callon 2007), and political science (cf. Latour 2002), and has been combined with other theoretical approaches (cf. Dölemeyer and Rodatz 2010; Kendall and Wickham 1999; van Dyk 2010; Walters 2012). Furthermore, while ANT started by looking at stabilizing and closing processes (cf. Callon 1986), it now has turned more and more to the transformative, fluid aspects of actor-networks, especially in the work of Helen Verran (2001) and Annemarie Mol, which has earned them the label “Post-ANT”.

Against this background, the specifics of the term “enactment” and its relevance to praxis- and performance-theory, as well as the method it brings along, begin to become obvious. Enactment, as Mol conceives of it within a fluid network of practices, can be understood as the conjuncture of diverse human and non-human actors who interact to create the situation and its entities or objects.

It is possible to say that in practices objects are enacted. This suggests that activities take place—but leaves the actors vague. It also suggests that in the act, and only then and there, something is—being enacted. Both suggestions fit in with the praxiography that I try to engage here. Thus an ethnographer/praxiographer out to investigate diseases never isolates these from the practices in which they are, what one may call, enacted. She stubbornly takes notice of the techniques that make things visible, audible, tangible, knowable. She may talk bodies—but she never forgets about microscopes. (Mol 2002, 33)

Accordingly, the beginning and end of the situation depend on this co-presence of multiple actors. Similarly, Lauren Berlant in her definition of situation starts with a sentence used by the police: “We have a situation here.” Based on the affective status connected to this phrase in police work, she defines situations to be a state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life (2011, 5). A situation is something that could become an event—meaning that it changes something in the course of the world .

In addition to a situational attentiveness, enactment is a way to look at practices while looking at humans *and* objects. Thus enactment and Mol bring a symmetric view (see above) to practice theory. It brings the affinity of practice theory towards

materiality to another level and starts from the assumption, that practices are not arrays of human activity, but of human and non-human activities. This furthering of practice theory and its descriptive mode becomes especially clear when Mol writes in a descriptive mode, which is why one of these passages is cited here at length:

In the consulting room something is done. It can be described as ‘pain in Mrs Tilstra’s left lower leg that begins on walking a short distance on flat ground and stops after rest.’ This phenomenon goes by the medical name intermittent claudication. Whatever the condition of her body before she entered the consulting room, in ethnographic terms Mrs. Tilstra did not yet have this disease before she visited a doctor. She didn’t enact it. When all alone, Mrs. Tilstra felt pain when walking, but this pain was diffuse and not linked up to a specific walking distance on flat ground. The trouble Mrs. Tilstra encountered when she tried to walk her dog did not yet have the shape that emerges when she answers her doctor’s question. This does not imply that the doctor brings Mrs. Tilstra’s disease into being. [...] without a patient he isn’t able to make a diagnosis. In order for ‘intermittent claudication’ to be practiced, two people are required. A doctor and a patient. [...] And in addition to these two people there are other elements that play a more or less important role. The desk, the chairs, the general practitioner, the letter: they all participate in the events that together, do’ intermittent claudication. As does Mrs. Tilstra’s dog, without whom she might not even have tried to walk more than fifty meters after which her left leg starts hurting. (2002, 22-23)

It is neither Mrs. Tilstra nor the doctor nor the dog alone that bring intermittent claudication and atherosclerosis into being—that enact the disease. It is all of them together in one moment. And this moment becomes transferable through the patient’s files, through further examinations and through the diagnosis itself: only because a name is given to the bundle of circumstances described by Mrs. Tilstra, a set of solutions can be attached to her walking problems. The disease is not only constructed, declared, diagnosed, performed here; it is made, because it is more than real. It is corporeal, physical, discursively all at the same time. And it is multiple, because what you get when you try to look at the disease is different from what you get when you try to feel it by touching and examining legs and blood vessels.

Mol’s approach to a disease and hospitals via “enactment” then is “a way out of the dichotomy between the knowing subject and the objects-that-are-known” (2002, 50). It spreads the activity of knowing widely, over tables, knives, records, microscopes, buildings. Thus it is neither patient nor doctor who knows a disease or condition; instead the disease is enacted through practices of examination, through the interplay of a bodily knowledge in the patient, in the doctor, as well as instruments and facilities. Thus not only atherosclerosis is enacted in a situation and dependent on a lot of different elements coming together, but also the doctor and the patient become enacted here. If the patient does not behave patient-like and does not tell the doctor anything that might be of interest to him or her, or if the other actants in the situation, e.g. the microscopes contradict what the patient is saying, he or she does not become a patient. And if the doctor or surgeon cannot come up with a diagnosis, i.e. if he cannot interact with or relate to the other elements in the situation, he or she does not become

the patient’s doctor here. Thus no actant or element is given or starts as a clear-cut entity in a situation.

Mol’s usage of the term “enactment” thus brings the engagement with practices to a very situative and symmetric level. Yet still—and although Mol has banned the term from her book— there is a certain closeness to performance theory that also focuses on the “microcosm of the social situation or scene,” the agency of the performer, and the emergence of phenomena pervades (Bronner 2012, 24; cf.: Kapchan 1996). Thus, one could argue, that enactment is kind of in the middle between performance and practice. While being located in practice theory, it situates these practices in a way that is perhaps compatible with performance theory as well.

Enactment, Change and Rupture in Engin Isin

When Turkish citizens claim their rights through the European Court of Human Rights, are they not acting as European citizens, despite not having EU citizenship? When asylum-seekers and Roma stand together to call for more political rights and less discrimination, are they not acting as European citizens? When campaigners for sex-worker rights throughout Europe organise a demonstration, are they not acting as European citizens even if they do not go through the formal channels of political engagement? (ENACT 2013)

These are the examples and questions Engin Isin and his co-researchers give to explain their research project, ENACT. Citizenship, they argue, is about more than legal status and is therefore “more than granting rights ‘from above’” (ENACT 2013). It is enacted everyday through actions and acts and therefore, the complex concept of citizenship should be regarded as a permanent and ongoing negotiation. Thus if you look for an active definition of citizenship (within Europe), those without legal status or those outside (of Europe) also come into view. They are a part of enacting (European) citizenship. And they are challenging and changing what is understood to be (European) citizenship through their acts of citizenships.

What is an act of citizenship? Acts of citizenship are moments in which—like in the examples above—people constitute themselves as citizens irrespective of their status. Thus “an act posits or articulates a right that is not yet there but which may exist elsewhere [...]. [...] An act starts to take what it asks for. For there to be an act it must perform or enact its demand” (2013, 38).

Isin differentiates between action and acts: something perceivable like a performance is an action. An act is instead the transcendental quality or abstraction of an action. To call an action an act is an analytic move by the observer or researcher that highlights the rupture with the status quo, with routinized, habitualized or institutionalized structures or givens. Acts are “a rupture rather than merely being without authorisation and convention” (ibid.). To act according to this perspective means neither to start from a script nor to leave it completely, but to constitute a new scene with all its roles (cf. Köster-Eiserfunke, Reichhold, and Schwiertz 2014). Thus acts point to the contingency of every regime. But, acts are only one mode of (doing/

expressing) citizenship, along with status and habitus.⁴

This is why Isin et al. also differentiates between active citizens and activist citizens: while the notion of an active citizen depicts the citizen with a status that takes responsibility, that votes, pays taxes, participates in polls, initiates petitions for referendums, participates in round tables or local politics or does his or her jury duty, activist citizens act in a way that interrupts given politics and orders—especially if they are not ‘legal citizens’. Isin concedes, though, that even voting and taxpaying can be acts of citizenship; for example if the rich pay more taxes by their own choice to break with the existing taxation system—thus challenging and maybe even changing it. Therefore while active citizens perform scripts, activist ones write scripts and thus have an effect.

The question then remains as to *how* an act must be to be disruptive: Does it have to be an event? Does it have to be public or have an effect or can it be imperceptible, that is a tiny action within daily routine that withdraws and breaks away from order? On this point, Isin et al. are very specific:

An ‘act’ can legitimately be understood in different ways. But they are not the same as any daily ‘actions.’ Acts, for our purposes, have some element of public visibility or purpose or political resonance. They might be single acts, or they might be a series of discrete acts—more or less continuous over a period of time, in other words. (Saward 2009)

Thus acts of citizenship are not only disruptive, they are always events, are always public. Accordingly, instead of looking at institutions and rights or subjective perspectives on Europe or European citizenship for example, Isin et al. look for a catalogue of mobility practices and claims. “The underlying methodological assumption is that acts do not only reflect perceptions, but constitute citizens, in and of themselves, irrespective of whether people are conscious of it or not” (Isin 2008b). Thus for example, mobility can be understood as act of citizenship and constitute an alternative notion of European citizenship. Questions that accordingly guide the research conducted by Isin et al. are:

What do these acts question, create, or reinforce with respect to our understanding of ‘European citizenship’? What idea(s) of European citizenship do they enact? Did the act(s) being studied have an impact on the way European citizenship status can, or should be, understood? For example, did it (or they) offer a potential way to expand the reach or relevance of the notion of European citizenship? Or are they asserting a ‘status’ (perhaps new or unfamiliar) that is not formally recognised as being a part of European citizenship, in order (subsequently) to claim that status for themselves (and others)? (Saward 2009)

Engin Isin and his colleagues use “enactment” in quite a different way from Mol. While Mol uses the term to avoid the notion of performance, to convey a situational and symmetric approach to everyday practices like medical consultations, in Isin et

al.’s ENACT-project, the term at once slides closer to aspects being associated with performance theory (publicity, singularity, difference to ordinary life, micro-context, metapragmatics, metadiscourse, freedom, resistance) and thus to Abraham’s (1977) understanding of the term. And yet, it stays within the realm of making or inaugurating or constituting something. Thus Isin is quite far away from practice theory on the one hand, I would say, but on the other hand he includes habitus in his model in order to put enactment in opposition and relation to it. He argues that acts are not always, but most of the time, disruptive of habitus. Thus while not bringing together performance and habitus theory in the way Mol does, Isin brings a critical angle to the enactment-concept.

The Situational Angle of Practices as seen through the Looking Glass of Enactment

Contrasting these two understandings of enactment—one where enactment is disruptive and one where it is part of everyday life—it becomes obvious, that in Isin’s understanding, enactment is closer to a folklore understanding of the term, while in Mol’s, it is closer to an ethnographic understanding. Still, I would point out that, in both understandings and usages of the term, there is the potential to zoom into situations and thus practice and transformation. The term “enactment” brings together a sensitivity for banal routine (Mol) as well as for events, situations of change and thus also for critique or for disturbing the taken for granted (Isin, but also Butler). Thus starting from day-to-day practices, the term and its perspective is always open to situative emergences, to shifts and turns, or to say it with Lauren Berlant: if a situation is “a state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life” (2011, 5), then the concept and perspective of “enactment” is sensitive towards both: the usual activity and the something that will perhaps matter. If something that matters happens, situations become events that change the course of discourse or history.

A situation can thus be both from the perspective of enactment: it can be a normal, day-to-day situation, but it can also be transformative. Which of the two is true is an empirical question then. This is also why the concept of “enactment” could be a possible bridge over the “theoretical gulf” in Folklore Studies separating performance-based and practice-based approaches.

In his article “Practice Theory in Folklore and Folklife Studies,” Simon Bronner (2012) looked at the phenomenon of practice theory being widely used in Europe to deal with folklore for some time, while in the US the same applies to performance theory. He wrote:

Since the 1960s, folkloristic approaches in North America and Europe have been thematised with the keywords of performance and practice, respectively. Although the orientations built around the keywords share a concern for conceptualising folklore as a type of expressive action, significant theoretical differences are apparent. Arising at a similar juncture in the twentieth century in response to social upheaval, they differ in the use of explanation or generalisation with performance often representing

singularity (and emergence) of an event and practice signifying the aggregate (and precedence) of folk behaviour. (2012, 23)

While both approaches want to deal with “expressive action,” with action/context/process and both want to further a “descriptive methodology,” there are ample differences between the two concepts (ibid., 24). Practice seems to be what performance is not and vice versa. While practice seems to be the routine, repetitive, usual, mundane, non-aesthetic activities representing social and cultural structures or located in practice communities, performance seems to be artistic, aesthetic, creative, free, resistant. While practice seems to be about what people do, performance seems to be more often what they say. Performance theory focuses on “the microcosm of the social situation or scene,” while practice theory focuses on a “holistic understanding of culture” (Bronner 2012, 24). This is why performance and practice seem to be polar opposites.

According to Bronner, however, this confrontation of the two concepts is much too simple. European folklore scholars use practice theory to be more descriptive, while US folklore scholars use performance theory for the same reason.

What is really interesting to me about the concept of enactment, therefore, is that it is somewhat in the middle of these two concepts while also bringing a new descriptive quality to situational analysis: it enables one to see not only humans but also non-humans actants within a situation. Above all, enactment does not take practices and repetitions as a given, but makes you wonder “why or how [...] action is repeated and varied,” and what is in a situation, whether it might become an event or not (Bronner 2012, 39). Therefore, it opens to the potentiality and multiplicity of each and every situation.

Notes

- 1 The title phrase was drawn from Lauren Berlant’s book “Cruel Optimism” (2011).
- 2 “In the literature there has been a lot of discussion about the term performance—a term that does not only resonate the stage but also the success after difficult work and the practical effects of words being spoken. I do not want these resonances, nor do I want this text to be burdened with discussions in which it seeks no part. But if one doesn’t want to be part of, let alone be played out in, controversies raging the literature, if one doesn’t want one’s text to be ground between concerns that aren’t one’s own, then what can be done? It may be helpful to avoid the buzzword, to look for a new term, a word that is still relatively innocent, one that resonates with fewer agendas. I have found one. Even if I have been using the term performance elsewhere in the past, I have carefully banned it from the present text” (Mol 2002, 41).
- 3 This perception of the term “enactment” as a term without history is highly problematic but quite typical for its genealogy. Although the concept has kind of been there for the past forty or so years, it has been newly invented and claimed at least four times, each time without many references to the predecessors: one of the first usages of the term was by folklorist Roger Abrahams in 1977. Building on Victor Turner’s dramaturgical perspective on folklore as well as a rhetoric-based approach, he argued for an enactment-centered

theory of folklore. Further, drawing on enactment was his “attempt to find a term which includes performances, games, rituals, festivities, etc., in short, any cultural event in which community members come together to participate, employ the deepest and most complex multivocal and polyvalent signs and symbols of their repertoire of expression thus entering into a potentially significant experience” (1977, 80). Enactment to him was thus a category broader than performance, including every “heightened and often self-consciously rendered cultural experiences [...] in which the coming together is prepared far, psychologically and otherwise, and participation is thereby strongly encouraged” (ibid., 81). What Abrahams calls enactments, are experiences and events that “stylize and epitomize the *everyday*” (ibid., 84-85) and are more framed and focused than other experiences. They thus transcend everyday life and are occasions of high intensity. Through stylizing, through enactment, life becomes self-conscious. Therefore enactments are always strange in Abraham’s perspective.

This understanding of enactments as special occasions and different from everyday life, as transcendent experiences, is quite opposite to other usages of the term, e.g. by organizational psychologist Karl Weick in 1988, by gender and queer theorist Judith Butler in 1990 or by Annemarie Mol in 2002. For economist Günther Ortman, for example, enactment is doing, is establishing meaning and perspectives, is performative determination and thus is also part of the everyday (1988).

This is also why gender and queer theorist Judith Butler has used the term to frame her understanding of sex and gender. Taking speech act theory further, she argues that not only do performative acts produce what they name, but that day-to-day routines are performative or producing our (gendered) reality. In her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble* (1990) she describes “gender as an enactment that performatively constitutes the appearance of its own interior fixity” (89) and sex as “a performatively enacted signification,” (44) “[n]o longer believable as an interior ‘truth’ of dispositions and identity” (ibid.). Butler argues, that the gendered body “has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (173), among them “corporeal signs and other discursive means” (ibid.).

- 4 Habit^{us}, for ENACT, is a mode of citizenship, or a way in which citizenship is instantiated. It refers to settled, implicitly accepted guiding norms of belonging or collectivity in smaller or larger communities. [...] Actions or practices within habit^{us}—that is, daily habitual actions—do reinforce habit^{us}, often unthinkingly. But there can be more conscious and significant acts of reinforcement, too, such as when a political leader says, “This community believes in citizenship traditions X and Y, and we must defend these traditions.” It is true that “acts of citizenship” in ENACT are more often focussed on disrupting, or acting to rupture, existing habits/habit^{us} of European citizenship.

But reinforcement of existing European citizenship habit^{us} is also an important topic for ENACT’s attention. Court decisions and legal rulings, for example, that bear upon European citizenship may reinforce habit^{us} by reinforcing emergent norms” (ENACT 2009).

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