

‘Civil Society’ and the Need to *Zoom In* – Enacting the Social through Crowdfunding*

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Abstract: Available conceptualizations of ‘civil society’ tend to depict the subject matter as a ‘thing’, often either credited with the potential to solve today’s most pressing social problems (the progressive view) or, conversely, seen as perpetuating prevailing orders of power (the conservative view). To venture beyond these essentialist imageries which envision ‘civil society’ as a static configuration which is always already there, we employ the metaphor of *zooming in* to argue that the social is radically open, that is, neither progressive or conservative a priori but becoming progressive or conservative in the way it is enacted through heterogeneous elements. With this as a backdrop, we introduce Actor-Network Theory and After to flesh out a post-foundational understanding of the social, and use the case of crowdfunding to reflect on how technology-mediated ordering practices might bring about alternative forms of sociality. The paper concludes that Actor-Network Theory and After – despite claims to the contrary – bears critical potential in the way it pinpoints, based on empirical insights, favorable ordering practices.

* This contribution signals the starting point of a nascent research project. Given the preliminary status of the ensuing thoughts, the text must not be cited without the authors’ consent.

“... through a strange twist of fate, [civil] society became at once what was *always criticized* as a fiction and what was *always there* nonetheless as the impassable horizon of all discussions concerning the social world.”

— Bruno Latour (2005: 163; emphasis in original)

Introduction

Probably one of the most conspicuous aspects about the ongoing economic crisis is that it has instigated a renaissance of the idea of ‘civil society’ (Terrier & Wagner, 2006). Contrasted with the economy (which is ‘down’ or at least significantly ‘impaired’) and the state (which has lost its monopoly, and indeed its capacity to secure citizens’ welfare and safety), ‘civil society’ has again become a signifier into which many of our current hopes are projected. On the face of it, in an atmosphere of increasing mistrust, social disintegration and insecurity, ‘civil society’ heralds a re-enchantment of the social. However, not everyone shares the opinion that ‘civil society’ will be able to lead us out of our current impasse. There is clearly no shortage of scholars who criticize ‘civil society’ for being part of bourgeois society, and for being linked to both the productive base of capitalism and of state regulation. This contribution, which fleshes out the contours of a nascent research project, seeks to illuminate that both readings of ‘civil society’ are misguided due to the way they conceive of the social: as a self-contained entity being made up of identifiable (if elusive) elements, as a holism which directs the course of events, or as a space occupied by powerful individuals and institutions. Challenging these views through Latour’s (2005) *Reassembling the Social*, we suggest that rather than envisioning ‘civil society’ as a universal whole which, in a peculiar way, is always already there we must approach the social as a process of continuous ordering. Based on this, we use the metaphor of *zooming in* to develop a non-essentialist understanding of the social, making it clear that the social is best studied where it happens and without

making use of transcendental sociological concepts. The case of crowdfunding is then used to illustrate our conceptual considerations, placing particular attention on the constitutive role of digital technology in the enactment of the social. We discuss that the value of Actor-Network Theory and After (henceforth ANT & A) manifests itself in the way it emphasizes that relational ordering practices are not a priori progressive or conservative but produce effects which, based on detailed empirical inquiry, can be judged as more or less favorable. The critical potential of ANT & A, as we conclude, resides in pinpointing that the social ‘as it is’ must not be taken for granted for it could always be enacted differently.

The contribution comprises three parts. In the first part, we discuss some of the dominant interpretations of ‘civil society’ so as to problematize the realization that they depict the social from an essentialist vantage point. In the second part, we use ANT & A to propose a post-foundational understanding of the social. In the third part, we demonstrate the concrete implications deriving from an ANT & T perspective for the inquiry of crowdfunding.

Part I

‘Civil Society’ – Progressive or Conservative?

‘Civil society’, a term which to this day has remained elusive for most political scientists and sociologists (Kaviraj & Khilnani, 2001), once again radiates an aura of hope and redemption. In a peculiar way, ‘civil society’ seems to blow new life into virtues such as civility, voluntarism, and collectiveness (Hilton & McKay, 2011), hence functioning as a kind of ‘gene-carrier’ of the good society (Edwards, 2009). Though positive appraisals of ‘civil society’ vary from author to author, many accounts are united in the conviction that ‘civil society’ offers a promising way to overcome some of today’s most pressing social problems. Indeed, in many theories of ‘civil society’ there is a belief that the only societal constituent able to inverse the global depreciation of the welfare of nations lies outside of the state and

the individual (Calhoun, 2002). Especially today, in an era of increased neoliberal individuation and fragmentation of the social, 'civil society' signals a sense of community and authenticity which effectively counter-acts the sort of disenchantment and alienation associated with the private sector and the state (Fournier & Kelemen, 2001). This being said, two specifications need to be made. In the state-centered view of 'civil society' a distinction can be made between synergetic and antagonistic models. In this first model, 'civil society' and the state are seen as co-implied in enabling democratic participation and political agency. Especially in neo-Tocquvillian accounts an understanding of the social manifests itself which construes 'civil society' as being positively associated with democratic governance (Foley & Edwards, 1996) in the sense that 'civil society' mediates individual self-interest and the political State. A similar contention is expressed in the writing of new left scholars such as Anthony Giddens (1998) who conceives of 'civil society' as the missing link in the success of social democracy, and as a solution that appears more available and realistic than the by now discredited utopia of revolutionary social change. Arguably one of the best known examples of the synergetic model of 'civil society' is Putnam's (1993) *Making Democracy Work* which purports that community spirit and associational activity are positively related with effective government. Where the synergetic model delineates 'civil society' as a sine qua non of representative government, the antagonistic model on the other hand expresses a deep-seated disbelief in the state's positive potential. The view of 'civil society' representing a space of resistance vis-à-vis tyrannical regimes has risen to prominence particularly after the end of the Cold War. Concretely, after the collapse of the East Bloc, it was argued that the best way forward for post-Communist countries would be to foster institutions of 'civil society' which would provide the "necessary basis for the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule" (Calhoun, 1993: 268). To be sure, the antagonistic model is not an invention of the post-1989 era. Where already Hegel was aware of the totalitarian tendency of the state, it is particularly Gramsci (2005) who conceived of the state (read political society) as a mere placeholder

which exists or is necessary only as long as ‘civil society’ is not yet able to take over its democratic function: “When civil society does manage fully to fill its role, the State as such will no longer exist” (Hardt, 1998: 26). Such radical enunciations of ‘civil society’, which anticipate the ‘withering away of the state’, have also been embraced (if for different purposes) by neoliberal philosophers such as Hayek who sees “civil society as protecting individual liberty through voluntary association from the coercive forces of the state” (Craig, 2009: 11). In this view, ‘civil society’ is associated with favorable forms of self-organizing which will occur, however, only under the condition that the state does not interfere into the ‘natural’ unfolding of events.

Despite its remarkable comeback, ‘civil society’ has clearly not stayed beyond reproach. Some of the more recent objections hold that the term is an inherent part of the rhetorical register of government authorities who seek to promote the idea of collective action while in fact “reducing the role of politics in society by expanding free markets and individual liberty” (Edwards, 2005). While used by government to promote responsibility and the capacity of social self-organization quite generally, ‘civil society’ has also been employed to signal the need for more entrepreneurial and business-like values and practices in quite diverse areas such as health, social care and regeneration. This instrumental signification of ‘civil society’, which is associated with a logic of achieving “more for less” (Hardill & Baines, 2011), creates a situation where the “state and society are effectively one” (Goonewardena & Rankin, 2004: 142). That is, ‘civil society’ forms a grid of intelligibility set up by government actors to intervene into the social, thus transforming it into a governable space (Stenson & Watt, 1999). It thus appears as though ‘civil society’ is intimately associated with a post-welfarist regime (Dean, 2010) where the state as the arbitrator of the social educates citizens to act and think according to its own logic. Rather than being autonomous from the state, this view sees ‘civil society’ as embodying the rationality of the state and as exercising its power by transforming individuals into “market-responsive, generic

service providers, disembedded from their social and political contexts and denuded of ethical or moral content and purpose” (Carmel & Harlock, 2008, p. 155). At heart, what is expressed is a fear that ‘civil society’ is stripped of its redemptive qualities, becoming a mere diagram of corporate and state interests (Edwards, 2008). This conservative exegesis of ‘civil society’ too is not endemic to the current situation since it was already expressed by Marxists who identified ‘civil society’ with bourgeois society, and thus as complicit with prevailing relations of power. Since connected with “the productive base of capitalist society, and in need of constant police and regulation by the state” (Khilnani, 2001, p. 15), ‘civil society’, instead of offering a space of self-governance, turned Gramsci’s vision on its head: instead of ‘civil society’ rendering obsolete the State (political society), it is ‘civil society’ which is threatened to wither away under the influence of the state (Hardt, 1998).

‘Civil Society’: A Term and Some Problems

The brief excursus, which was far from conclusive, aimed at heeding some of the more prominent interpretations of ‘civil society’, while showing that the concept is reflected either in its progressive or conservative dynamic. Thus the question arises as to how it is possible that completely opposing appraisals emanate from the same concept? In our assessment, the puzzle at hand can be read as an artifact of looking at ‘civil society’ from too far away (which in turn supports the impression that ‘civil society’ is a stable, durable ‘thing’). To unpack some of the problems associated with the interpretation of ‘civil society’ as containing some sort of substance, we will use the ensuing paragraphs to shed light on and problematize some of the ways in which ‘civil society’ is *thingified* (i.e. made appear as an essence).

A first mode of thingifying goes back to the assumption that ‘civil society’ designates a distinct object of analysis, an object that is “not reducible to either state or individual” (Calhoun, 1993). Drawing an imaginary line between ‘civil society’ and, for instance, the state helps conjure up the image of ‘civil society’ being a *sui generis* entity

(Latour, 2005), that is, an entity 'of its own kind'. It is important to note that even though it is often acknowledged that the division between 'civil society' and its other (be that the state, the individual, or the economic realm) is analytical rather than substantive (Hardt, 1998), such dividing practices nevertheless work to establish an impression of 'civil society' having an existence of its own. The impression of having an existence of its own (i.e. independent of human existence) is further supported by connecting 'civil society' with other abstractions such as 'good governance' which endows the former with a sense of agency. This agency is, no doubt, mystical in that the precise ways in which 'civil society' influences, shapes, determines, etc. a given phenomena remains unexplained. Denoting 'civil society' as a kind of metaphysical structure hence comes at a high price because although 'civil society' appears to be everywhere, it is hardly possible to locate it in particular. The problem involved in the *sui generis* interpretation of 'civil society' is that it is, due to treating the social as a holism (Law & Mol, 2002), insufficient for understanding the full complexity, relationality and processual aspects of the social. Though the *sui generis* view might be helpful for developing prophetic previews of the social (Latour, 2005), it remains inadequate when taken as a description of how the social actually *happens* in and through mundane practices.

The second mode of thingification represents the inverse strategy of the first mode: rather than designating 'civil society' as a holism in order then to elaborate its very elements, the second mode proceeds by way of approaching 'civil society' from the bottom up, as it were. This 'bottom-up' construction is manifest in, for instance, approaches which map the diverse values, norms, forms of organization, etc. which occur in a defined social space. A typical example would be approaches which map different forms of voluntary associations such as families, churches, neighborhoods, etc. while concluding that they are all part of civil society (Edwards, 2005). What happens in this second gesture is that an artificial aggregate (read 'civil society') is set up to support the impression of there being an emerging structure which is always 'more than the sum of its parts' (Latour et al., 2012). To be sure, construing

‘civil society’ as an essence with diverse elements often takes place in an almost accidental fashion. For instance, there are frequent examples where the term ‘civil society’ is merely used to allude to the broader context of a given inquiry (“this inquiry investigates non-profit organizations ... which are part of Swiss civil society”). The reflex to account for, however flippantly, the inquiry’s context has distinct ontological consequences. Especially accounts which portray ‘civil society’ as a kind of container (Palmas, 2012) in which certain ‘things’ are located or take place produce a reified view of the social. As with the *sui generis* view, seeing ‘civil society’ as an emergent structure is problematic to the extent that it supports the conclusion that there must exist some higher macro-order beyond or behind the level of concrete experience. Moreover, it is dangerous as it implies that ‘civil society’ can be known in much the same way as one might know a chair, a pen, or a flower (Law, 2009).

Even though simplification is an issue here, it is nevertheless safe to suggest that ‘civil society’ is often treated as an essence that has a life of its own. ‘Civil society’, both in its materialization as a *sui generis* or as an emergent structure, conjures up a romantic vision of the social being a more or less coherent whole. Latour (2005), among others, has demonstrated that such a signification of the social is misleading, and that it would indeed be more appropriate to think of it as ‘false philosophy’ which does little more than offer a wrong sense of security. What appears most irritating in this conjunction is that many scholars who casually hark back on an essentialist understanding of ‘civil society’ would agree, after close scrutiny, that ‘civil society’ is merely “a virtual reality, a *cosa mentale*, a hypostasis, a fiction” (Latour, 2005: 165). But since the discussion mostly does not go any further than this (in the sense: “we are perfectly aware that ‘civil society’ is a phantom, but we use the concept anyway”), there is a good chance that ‘civil society’ will stay with us for some time to come. In light of this, it appears tempting to complain that “if you can’t explain something, put it down to civil society!” (Edwards, 2005). Yet, such critique is only helpful to the extent that it enables a non-essentialist understanding of the social.

Part II

The Need to *Zoom In* on the Social

The limit of any essentialist rendering of ‘civil society’ stems from the fact that it forms an abstraction that often has little to say about how the social came into existence in the first place. Hence the closer one *zooms in* on ‘civil society’, the more it becomes questionable where precisely it resides, or whether it exists at all. Instead of bumping into some universal configuration, it is more likely that zooming in on ‘civil society’ will lead us to the realization that things are actually much different from what is usually assumed. Tarde, the long-time nemesis of Emil Durkheim, was well aware of this conundrum, suggesting that it is wrong to believe that “in order to see a gradual dawn of regularity, order and logic in social phenomena, we must go outside of the details, which hare essentially irregular, and rise high enough to obtain a panoramic view of the general effect” (Tarde, 1899: 160; quoted in Day, 2009: 726). The point to be stressed here is that Tarde purported that the social could be discovered without recourse to abstract concepts such as ‘society’ for all that was needed was a meticulous study of what was empirically available (i.e. relationships between actors). Tarde called on sociologists to *zoom in* rather than *zoom out* on the social so as to develop knowledge outside of the debilitating influence of dominant sociological theories of ‘society’. Tarde’s influence seems to reverberate in recent inquiries which have studied ‘civil society’ from the perspective of where it happens, as it were, thus producing evidence which chiefly defies the assumption of ‘civil society’ being a discrete entity with stable properties. For instance, many institutions which were hitherto associated with ‘civil society’, such as environmental NGOs, were suddenly fulfilling roles which were usually taken on by government actors or multinational companies (Mol, 2009). Also, the emergence of hybrid organizations and sub-political networks testifies to how novel institutional forms are at odds

with the assumption of clearly identifiable boundaries between ‘civil society’, the state, and the commercial sector. The increasing interdependence of the sectors, and the accelerated global circulation of social, cultural, and economic flows (Lash & Urry, 1994, 2000), makes it clear that conventional sociological approaches premised on a substantialist focus on entities will not get us very far in capturing how the social is enacted. Fortunately, there have already been different attempts to develop a post-foundational approach which favors processes of becoming over stable, pre-existent structures. We believe that Actor-Network Theory and After (Law & Hassard, 1999) forms a particularly apt candidate for such a post-foundational agenda. That is, rather than pursuing the sort of sociology outlined by, for instance, Durkheim (the macro-perspective of the social) or Weber (the micro-perspective of the social), ANT & A approaches the social topologically, that is, as if the social was two- instead of three-dimensional. This view has been convincingly addressed in Latour’s (2005) *Reassembling the Social*. According to Latour, who followed Tarde in contending that the distinction between micro and macro undermines any attempt to understand how ‘society’ is actually brought into existence, the difficulty entailed in such hierarchical distinctions is that the researcher is constantly torn in two opposite directions. If focusing on the micro-level (e.g. concrete interactions of individuals), there is a sudden urge to explain the phenomena revealed there against the backdrop of their broader context. However, the moment one moves toward the macro-level (i.e. structuring context), the researcher will immediately be confronted with an urge to “leave the abstract level for ‘real life’, ‘human size’, ‘lived-in’ sites” (Latour, 2005: 169). Given that the macro is much too weak and elusive to offer any concluding interpretation of the micro (and vice versa), the advice is to let go of the assumption of different scales (micro/meso/macro) to approach the social as if it were flat, thus assuming that everything takes place on the same plane. The researcher’s task then is to trace the details of how actors produce the social by means of creating networks of heterogeneous elements. By implication, whether the social is big or small, progressive or conservative becomes a

question which can only be answered empirically. *Zooming in* hence emphasizes that a naïve close look at the social ‘in the making’ (Law, 1994) can raise critical insights as to why we think of, for instance, individuals and organizations as being *in* ‘civil society’, and why we should take for granted that ‘civil society’ has fixed properties and elements. While presupposing a willingness to refrain from deciding in advance what the social is, the metaphor of *zooming in* means studying how the ‘things’ we traditionally take for granted are enacted, thus continuing the anti-essentialist assumption of the social (Steyaert, 2007).

A Post-foundational Inquiry of the Social

Where having used ANT & A to problematize the idea of ‘civil society’, and to briefly illustrate how *zooming in* challenges approaches that give priority to an essentialist view of the social, the next step consists in probing ANT & A’s potential for developing a post-foundational account of the social. Where post-foundationalism quite generally opposes the idea of there being an ultimate foundation upon which one can judge a given belief or conviction, we use the term here to hint at an understanding of the social which is not subordinated to universal laws or ‘first principles’. We thus elaborate three, partly interrelated analytical principles involved in a post-foundational inquiry of the social inspired by ANT & A. To begin with, ANT & T contributes to a post-foundational account by showing that the social is not pre-ordained but, rather, an effect of concrete ordering practices. Essentially, ANT & T sees the social as “a patterned network of heterogeneous materials – not only people but also machines, animals, texts, objects, buildings and so on – which are kept together by active processes of ordering” (Steyaert, 2007: 468). Highlighting how networks of heterogeneous elements become established and stabilized, ANT & A’s practice-based perspective brings to light that the social is a transient achievement, “continuous and unfinished, precarious and partial – a permanent process that generates more or less stable effects; a heterogeneous emergent phenomenon” (Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010: 425). Second,

and relatedly, whilst purporting that the social emanates from identifiable ordering practices, ANT & A further assumes that the heterogeneous elements (e.g. money, images, narratives, objects, etc.) which are interwoven into networks and assemblages do not possess a fixed essence which remains unchanged during the course of the ordering process. Hence, rather than entering the ordering process preformed, the heterogeneous elements of any given network derive their meaning and identity precisely from how they are related with other elements, and from the particular role they get to play within the network. ANT & A thus contributes to a post-foundational inquiry of the social by suggesting that “nothing exists autonomously without relations that sustain entities, which is a clear stance against naturalizing ordering or viewing it in a simplistic way” (Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010: 424). Third, pointing out that a particular way of enacting the social could always be ‘otherwise’ (Latour, 2005), and taking into account that ordering practices represent a kind of ‘crazy vitality’ (Thrift, 2005) whose effects and developments are always unpredictable, ANT & A entails studying the social in a radically open manner, that is, without determining a priori what the social *essentially* is. Such an approach, which Flyverbom (2011) calls agnostic, dispenses with aggregate concepts of the social while placing full attention on the continuous process of ordering. Conducting research in such a way means foregrounding the becoming of the social while remaining open toward the performative surprises associated with concrete ordering practices.

Part III

The Research Project: Crowdfunding as Alternative Ordering Practice?

Project Description

In our research project (which is still in the funding phase) titled *Spacing Ethics: Freedom in the Enactment of Heterotopian Spaces*, we address three fields of problematization (Callon, 1986; Foucault, 1986): (a) the field of finance whose prevailing lending practices proved insufficient for bringing into existence innovative social and ecological idea(l)s, (b) the field of retail industry whose excess production inter alia leads to a loss of large quantities of high-quality food, and (c) the field of knowledge production which has become overtly aligned with issues of commercialization, thus missing out on pursuing more emancipatory ends. The objective thus is to identify different ways in which these fields are addressed as matters of concern, how certain networks and hybrid arrangements are created to solve, mitigate, bypass, etc. the identified problems, how these networks and arrangements in turn are supported or constrained respectively by other powerful actors, and whether these endeavors enact conditions of individual and collective existence outside of or at the margins of prevailing modes of imagination (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011) and dominant modes of organizing (Parker, 2002). Crowdfunding forms an exemplary case of the first field of problematization where it is used to study whether and how internet technologies help produce geographically dispersed networks of heterogeneous elements which render possible innovative social and ecological ideas outside of conventional financial flows. More specifically, where ‘civil society’ organizations and the sort of sociality they produce is largely shaped by and hence dependent on private donations or government grants, crowdfunding is supposed to replace or complement grant competitions or conventional fundraising strategies by raising money from a large number of people (read the crowd). Choosing crowdfunding as an empirical case is informed by the following considerations. First, crowdfunding attests to the fact that financial

resources do play a pre-eminent role in the production and transformation of almost every social space imaginable. Second, where digital technology (notably the web 2.0) has radically changed the coordinates and possibilities of interaction and collaboration, crowdfunding offers a way to study how such technologies support the development of particular networks of heterogeneous elements, and to evaluate whether the effects of the respective networks can be deemed favorable (cf. below). The third consideration departs from the realization that the nascent literature on crowdfunding tends to celebrate the subject matter as the *de facto* solution to the problem of financial scarcity. Though we concede that web 2.0 technologies offer novel opportunities for becoming active citizens, we sense a need to introduce a healthy dose of skepticism to the current debate. That is to say, though crowdfunding is *in principle* associated with alternative (read more just, emancipatory, equitable, etc.) ordering practices, it is always possible (and often likely) that a given crowdfunding initiative is co-opted by powerful actors such as large international banks, that it gets restricted by legal stipulations or, simply, that it fails in mobilizing the crowd. Hence unlike popular representations of crowdfunding, we would like to establish a more nuanced comprehension of the subject matter, for instance by demonstrating that relational ordering practices do not take place outside of power and do not engender an authentic space of freedom. We approach the nexus of crowdfunding and power by not locating the latter in a particular actor but by studying it in conjunction with actor' ability to mobilize other actors to participate in crowdfunding, to define trajectories and identities with which other actors comply, to shape the parameters of the technological intermediaries so as to make sure that their intentions are effectively realized, and quite generally to define the rules which stipulate what is possible and what not (Callon, 1986; Akrich & Latour, 2002).

Methodological Considerations

Foregrounding complex ordering practices in our empirical analysis implies the use of a case study design (Yin, 2003) which allows studying in detail the richness and complexity of socio-material processes. Our case study design includes a longitudinal perspective which endorses the processual dynamics of ordering practices (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010) while taking into account that socio-material networks constantly change. Reflecting on methodology, it must be noted that ANT & A does not offer a clear-cut methodological toolbox which gives researchers clear guidance in their respective endeavors. Rather than defining what research is and how it should be practiced, ANT & A has chiefly focused on deconstructing traditional ways of understanding research without in turn offering a research pedagogy. In this project, we take the following inspirations from ANT & A to develop further our understanding of inventive and interventionist research. The first inspiration stems from Law (2004) as well as Law and Urry (2004) who argue that research and method are not primarily concerned with describing but with enacting (i.e. bringing into being) reality. In this view, research and method has been reflected in its performative and not in its representational function. The second and related inspiration derives from Mol's (1999) 'ontological politics' which inter alia implies that research is a deeply political activity. Where research is conceived as enacting realities, this has immediate political implications because processes of reality-making are not and can never be neutral. We hence take stock of Mol's politicization of research to argue that our own research is not merely *about* critical ordering practices but *inherently critical* in the way it helps enact and "reconfigure what is sayable and visible in a specific social space" (Beyes & Steyaert 2011: 112). The objective thus is to suggest not seeing research on alternative ordering practices primarily as a matter of "getting it right" but of participating in and with the subject of inquiry so as to become part of the spaces of ordering through which "alternatives" are enacted.

Data collection

Whilst the social quite generally involves forging and stabilizing networks (Law & Hetherington, 2003), this implies a kind of data collection procedure which is sufficiently ‘flexible’ to follow the network’s variegated and shifting ordering practices. Consequently, we will use ethnography, which has been the method of choice of most actor-network studies (Latour, 1999), as a methodological reference point. Ethnography offers an apt approach for studying spaces of alternative orderings precisely because of its orientation to heterogeneous and multi-layered (ordering) practices. Ethnography is a methodology which purports the view that understanding complex social realities presuppose that the researcher spends extended periods of time with the subject of inquiry. Importantly, given that the ordering practices through which the social is enacted ‘on the ground’ have a distinctly spatial dimension, this implies that many of the ordering practices being studied will not be static but moving in space. It is in this connection that mobile methods (Urry, 2007; Büscher et al., 2011) appear most helpful. Compared to traditional ethnographies, mobile methods give significantly more emphasis to the spatiality of assemblages of practice. In analogy with ANT & A, mobile methods are marked by an attentiveness to the interweaving of heterogeneous elements in the constitution of reality. Hence unlike many ethnographies which study cultural practices in a relatively limited geographical realm (e.g. an office or a village), mobile methods suggest that researchers participate in patterns of movement to become part of the powerful performativity of flows of bodies, stories, images, objects, etc. While our data collection procedure chiefly entails recording experiences and observations through ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973), the precise form of this recording will largely depend on whether the practices being studied occur on a local, relatively stable scale or whether they are mobile. In the later case, the researcher will be co-present in the respective movements and apply a range of interviewing, observing, and recording technologies ‘on the move’ (Büscher et al., 2011). Our study begins with inquiring the founders of the crowdfunding

platform so as to study how they mediate the assemblage of practices and networks, and how they keep the networks connected (Thrift, 2000). Interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed. Furthermore, time-space diaries will be used where the funders as well as other human actors participating in particular crowdfunding projects can record their activities (including where they take place). We will also follow the movement of stories and images related with the crowdfunding platform, and also study associated digital activities such as blogs, websites, e-mails.

Data analysis

In accordance with recent attempts to bridge issues of language and practice in the analysis of processes of organizing (Sillince & Barker, 2012), our analysis simultaneously looks at narratives and the distinct practices of ordering of which they are part. In so doing, we do not study narratives in terms of their temporal continuities and space-less performance. Indeed, though our data collecting procedure is strongly influenced by ethnography (cf. above), we dispense with its foregrounding of textual practices because texts, as Bryman (2004) rightly claims, necessarily remain inert and “non-reactive”. Any static and isolated treatment of text would hence leave partly unaddressed the question of how narratives interact and are connected with other human and non-human entities through distinct ordering practices. Consequently, the focus of our analysis is to treat narratives of the different stakeholders connected to the crowdfunding initiative as just one aspect in the broader socio-material assemblage through which the social gets enacted. In accordance with ANT & A, texts are conceived as inscription devices which are less about representing things but about translating, mediating, and mobilizing them (Latour, 1999). Putting texts on par with other human and non-human entities makes it possible to analyze the social as a “wide array of economic, social and political practices, infrastructures and ideologies that all involve, entail or curtail various kinds of movement of people, or ideas, or information or objects” (Büscher

et al., 2011: 4). Drawing from Law (1994), our analysis chiefly entails telling stories about the socio-materiality of alternative ordering practices. This inter alia involves geographical stories which take into account the spatial dimension of freedom, that is, how people, ideas, money, images, and objects perform in particular sites, and in so doing create spaces of alternative ordering. To be sure, our analysis is not governed by pre-ordained analytic rules. Rather, since working with a participatory and interventionist logic, it would be inconsistent to separate the analytic procedure from the “object” of analysis. Where participants of our research are always already involved in stipulating the project’s trajectory, including its analytic procedure and focus, the precise way in which the analysis is carried will become a matter of mutual negotiation.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper we have discussed some of the shortcomings associated with the essentialist understanding of ‘civil society’, and used ANT & A to construe the social not as a substance but as a relational achievement based on complex ordering practices. Though our work in progress remained descriptive, we nevertheless hope that we were able to illustrate that *zooming in* on the social is immediately rewarding for it brings to the fore the social and material conditions of possibility of reality (Latour et al., 2012). Also, we hope that our paper achieved to point out the critical potential of ANT & A which manifests itself in not judging one’s subject of inquiry (read crowdfunding) a priori but based on the particular effects it engenders. Mentioning critique is crucial to the extent that early ANT studies have been largely discredited for being politically neutral since unable to address issues such as power, domination, exploitation, etc. Given this harsh verdict, we believe that it effectively misses its mark for it ignores the many studies which have shown that ANT & A does not necessarily support, for instance, an un-reflexive epistemology or a performative politics (Whittle &

Spicer, 2008). Where ANT & A is chiefly interested in revealing how the social is enacted, this not only undermines any mistaken belief in the facticity of ‘things’ (Guggenheim & Potthast, 2012) but also makes it clear that the social can, in principle, be enacted differently. Consequently, studying crowdfunding is not merely an epistemological task (i.e. producing knowledge) but an ontologically political endeavor (Mol, 1999). That is to say, research on crowdfunding and other forms of alternative organizing (Parker, 2002) becomes political in the way it separates favorable ordering practices from unfavorable ones. Though deducing prescriptive blueprints of the social is out of the question, ANT & A can – based on a detailed tracing of networks of heterogeneous networks – offer valuable insights in the pursuit of a critical research agenda of the social.

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