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Can ANT be a form of activism?

Tomás Sánchez Criado and Israel Rodríguez-Giralt

Ever since the 2011's *indignados* or '15-M' (May 15th) movement started – occurring after the occupation of Spain's main city squares, and later on developing into interesting forms of urban activism – the personal and academic life of many of us in Spain has turned into a perpetual unfolding of particular protests and activist struggles, with a lasting impact on our modes of doing research. One good example of this was Tomás' ethnographic involvement, since 2012, in an open design initiative called *En torno a la silla* (ETS). This initiative comprised a few people who had met in the 'functional diversity commission' of the 15-M encampments in Barcelona,[1] where different wheelchair-using activists of the Independent Living Forum had come across other people – all of them long-standing participants in several activist groups and initiatives and some of them with design and making skills – and started doing things together in a 'free culture' atmosphere. After suffering from the inaccessible conditions of the precarious places they started to occupy and share, many of those participants decided to intervene in these spaces.

For instance, in the summer of 2011, before ETS came into being, a material intervention was undertaken in the yearly Gràcia district festivities, aiming to reclaim the accessibility lost during the festival due to the emplacement of street decorations and concert stages. At the request of the Festivities Council of the Fraternitat Street, where Sebastián Ledesma (one of the members of the functional diversity commission) lived, singular yellow ramps (Figure 34.1) showing the black and yellow inscription 'revolution will be accessible or it won't be' were produced and displayed. After this first attempt, the people who would later initiate ETS – Antonio Centeno, an independent living activist, Alida Díaz, architect, and Rai Vilatovà, anthropologist and craftsperson – sought to join forces to co-design a free/open kit 'to activate the wheelchairs' environments' otherwise, comprising a portable wheelchair ramp and other gadgets transforming the wheelchair,[2] a kit whose main results would be digitally documented and openly distributed so that anyone could draw inspiration from it. This was not an act of charity by do-gooders, but rather an experimental attempt to prolong a nascent friendship between specific 'disabled' and 'non-disabled' people by technical and material means. Tomás later joined the project when they were beginning to prototype these elements, and in the practice-oriented and engaged context of everyone doing something for the common project, he made his ethnographic skills available, acting as an audiovisual 'documenter' of the

Figure 34.1   Sebastián Ledesma testing the ramps at Fraternitat Street. Picture CC BY Functional Diversity Barcelona commission (August 2011, used with permission)

collective. Several other people came and went in the following years, devoting great amounts of time to the audiovisual documentation, the open prototyping, the public reflection and/or the organisation of workshops and events to show and discuss what it meant to act in this way.

All of this was a common way of 'acting' popularised at the time of the 15-M. Indeed, ETS could be said to be part and parcel of a singular activist ecology, an heir of the particular 'collaborative turn' that the 15-M enacted. As various scholars have tried to convey (Arribas, 2018; Moreno-Caballud, 2015), 15-M's main form of collective action pivoted around not only just a wild experimentation with 'artivist' initiatives – mostly against austerity measures, political corruption and technocratic forms of knowledge production. It also showed a deep concern with enacting a politics of listening and of the 'liberation' and documentation of knowledges in the wake of a broad 'free culture' ethos (Corsín & Estalella, 2016; Martín Sáinz de los Terreros, 2018; Postill, 2018). In a time of great collective effervescence, this '15-M' way of doing politics also shaped forms of research grounded on an ethics of companionship and an experimentation with the modes of joining together different people, knowledges and kinds of worlding.

In this chapter, we would like to *think with* the ETS collective, and in particular the research engagement afforded by their intense social and material explorations in the environmental intervention and remaking of wheelchair users and their surroundings. We will characterise this particular form of research activism as 'joint problem-making': Comprising a series of social and material interventions to problematise, transform and account for the worlds being produced together with others. Our main aspiration in doing this would be to describe the impact it had on us as researchers: Or, to be more specific, on our ways of engaging ethnographically, and to consider how this might inspire the 'experimentally collaborative' or 'activated' ways in which ANT researchers might engage in other activist ecologies.

ANT research on technoscientific activisms

But before attempting to delve into this, allow us to briefly outline some of the most important ANT-related works dealing with activist initiatives and social movements. Already in

the 1990s, ANT had attempted a certain redefinition of 'collective action' beyond human-centric accounts and a means-ends understanding of action that was fundamental in opening up an agenda around technoscientific activism, charting *hybrid collectifs* and their 'multiform kinds of agency' (Callon & Law, 1997: 113). On the one hand, for ANT accounts, action was framed as 'collective': Meaning that agency is to be described as a distributed and materially heterogeneous process, imputable to particular entities only after the fact. This particular stance allowed the sociology and anthropology of social movements to expand their reach, paying attention to the role of more-than-human actors in particular forms of activism (Rodríguez-Giralt, 2011). On the other hand, ANT-related scholars became interested in going beyond an instrumental understanding of action (Latour, 2002): Paying attention to the thorny issue of mediations or the multifaceted role of 'attachments' in these *hybrid collectifs* (Gomart & Hennion, 1999) and how they prod particular forms of doing, either in action or in passion, in particular events. In fact, continuing their early analysis of the very particular 'power of reason' (Latour, 1987), ANT-related scholars took issue with how forms of technoscientific activism challenge that power in particular ways. That is, they sought to engage in understanding particular forms of 'activating' technoscientific issues, be it through expanding given matters of concern and 'truth politics' (e.g. addressing experiences not considered), or disputing particular arrangements or *agencements* that make *hybrid collectifs*, such as markets (Callon, 2008).

In *Acting in an Uncertain World*, Michel Callon and associates (2011) explored the boundaries and challenges of the mode of knowledge production known as 'secluded research.' Building on Latour's (1987) seminal explorations on how laboratories gain power through gathering inscriptions in centres of calculation to 'act at a distance,' they describe the particular operation that takes place in laboratories as one of 'Translation' (capitalised in the original): A threefold process that goes from a transportation of the world into the miniature space of the lab through the accumulation of inscriptions (translation 1), to the many manipulations and calculations of a research collective in that space until the phenomenon is controlled or 'black boxed' (translation 2), and can then be brought back into the world as a stable entity potentially changing existent relations (translation 3). However, as they suggest, in the last decades, a whole gamut of 'hybrid forums' – including both experts and laypersons – of the most varied kinds (e.g. environmentalist or embodied health collectives) have been putting secluded research in crisis (see Waterton and Cardwell, this volume), generating many avenues for the renewal of the ancient STS project of 'technical democracy.' Indeed, their main proposal was to open up a research programme on what they called 'research in the wild' (Callon & Rabeharisoa, 2003), a term used to describe the many different practices of laypersons seeking to 'activate' technoscientific practice in particular ways, potentially democratising the who and how of technoscience. One of the most interesting contributions of these works is its singling out of the role of 'emergent concerned groups' (Callon & Rabeharisoa, 2008): That is, those who audaciously search to find ways to transform the market and/or technoscientific arrangements that leave them behind or cause them to suffer from particular unpredicted overflows.

Indeed, this was ANT researchers' main contribution to broader discussions in STS around activism and social movements (Hess et al., 2008). Interestingly, these discussions have also been important for the consolidation of STS:[3] Indeed, this has become a research domain probing into the processes by which scientific truth and credibility, or technical objects, are publicly opened up for debate, scrutiny, control or co-construction in different narratives in which activism becomes a democratising agent, an 'activator' of alternative technoscientific practices.[4] In turn, these reflections have opened up interesting debates with

regard to: (a) The normative horizons of STS practice and how activism may contribute to the co-construction of science and technology and to public control and participation in the development of science and technology (Sismondo, 2008); and (b) the different meanings of politics and democracy, and what STS could do to better articulate science, technology and democracy (Latour, 2007; Marres, 2007). However, in most of ANT and STS literature, the role of the analyst is left untouched: Most works present themselves as a study *of* activism, not studies *in* and *through* activism. In contrast, we want to ask: How does the activation, criticism, contestation and dispute of technoscientific knowledges and arrangements 'activate' (Rodríguez-Giralt et al., 2018) our own research practices or us as researchers?

Becoming 'activated' as researchers

But how to open up a reflection against our own very 'dogmatic negations,' to use Stengers and Pignarre's (2011) terms? That is, how to resist the impinging professionalisation of ANT as a 'too comfortable,' 'self-complacent' or 'undisputable' research space? Perhaps we might draw inspiration from two research programmes in STS that have been developing more explicit 'materialist-interventionist' versions of what an ANT-related mode of engagement might look like: (1) The debate around action-oriented research or the role of 'situated interventions'; and (2) the debates around 'matters of care.'

In recent years, a debate has arisen in STS around how to develop a more 'action-oriented' type of engagement in the worlds we study, and the practical ways in which such more socially and politically committed interventions might take place. We specially refer here to the work of Teun Zuiderent-Jerak and colleagues (Zuiderent-Jerak & Jensen, 2009; Zuiderent-Jerak, 2015). In contrast to some calls for a transformation of STS foregrounding, a 'realistic' (Bal et al., 2004) or an 'engaged' (Hamlett, 2003) political *ethos*, theirs stands out because of a desire to develop a situated stance: One where normativities are addressed as part of the reflexivity displayed in different types of experimental modes of intervention beyond textual/discursive means. This is not, for sure, a new relativist agenda but rather an approach to specificities: A descriptive and reflexive attitude of exploring

> the different forms interventions can take […] in a hybrid space, in which many agents constantly negotiate and influence each other, in order to achieve multiple conflicting goals. A picture emerges of intervention as mutual betrayal, or, more positively, as a process of artful contamination whereby actors spread their agendas, ideas and aspirations.
>
> *(Zuiderent-Jerak & Jensen, 2009: 230–231)*

Another inspiring materialist-interventionist agenda we could draw from to rethink ANT modes of engagement stems from the critical reflections by several feminist technoscience scholars around care. Feminist debates in STS not only have complicated and unsettled care as an analytic (Martin, Myers and Viseu, 2015; Mol, 2008; Jerak-Zuiderent, this volume; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), but have also sought to foreground the impact these vocabularies and reflections might have on our role as analysts. For instance, in Puig de la Bellacasa's (2011) parlance, 'care' ought to be considered as, simultaneously, an 'affective state,' a 'material/vital doing' and an 'ethico-political obligation.' Interestingly for our purposes, she is perhaps one of the most vocal in inviting us to *think with* the collectives and issues we work with as a matter of care. As she puts it: 'transforming things into matters of care is a way of relating to them, of inevitably becoming affected by them, and of modifying their potential to affect others' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 64).

This affective obligation should then lead scholars to address carefully those collectives whose particular ecology of practices makes them more vulnerable with regard to particular hegemonic forms of knowledge production and politics. This involves finding ways of 'speaking well' about the practices we study: That is, characterising the mode of action of its practitioners without disregarding what matters to them (see López, this volume), but also foregrounding the frictional relations we may have with them. In some occasions, as it happened with our independent-living friends, a careful attitude might entail finding alternative vocabularies to the one around care – highly disputed because of its perceived connotations, implying their treatment as passive objects or recipients of care (see Shakespeare, 2006).

When brought to the study of activist groups, these series of concerns may be translated into a commitment to approach such groups not only as 'recipients of the academic gaze' but also as 'knowledge-making agents in their own right,' as several works in the literature of social movements have stated for years (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008; Melucci, 1989; Rabeharisoa et al. 2014). This sensitivity has also helped to articulate a wealth of modes of research engagement that open themselves to activism: such as militant research, feminist research, emancipatory research, indigenous and decolonial research, participatory action research, etc. We believe that all of these lines of inquiry, foregrounding a problematisation around intervention, and in allowing us to think *with* and *from* activism as a mode of research pave an interesting way for ANT to draw inspiration and to carefully explore the ways in which activism might change our own research practices (Rodríguez et al., 2018). To expand on this, allow us to go back to the case of ETS.

Engaging in 'joint problem-making'

In late 2012, Tomás began curating the social media of the ETS collective – notably, the blog and social networks – taking minutes, and helping in the coordination of the process of documentation, crafting tutorials and how-to guides, and preparing meetings and public presentations. This mode of ethnographic engagement had lasting effects not only in the particular ways of undertaking research, but also in what the collective was doing. In fact, their free/open design practice foregrounded different practices of forms of 'relating' – forging relations with others and accounting for them – that were absolutely central in their design/interventive practice. Even as documentation played a fundamental role, it was taken as a driver of non-predicative forms of knowledge (Criado & Cereceda, 2016): That is, as a form of showing others our efforts to make do, either to inspire them or so that they could relate to us and start newer dialogues, rather than as a form of evidence (or, if at all, as evidence that another life could be possible).

Actually, as was the case in other developments and alliances derived both from the 15-M encounters (see García-Santesmases et al., 2017) and from the Spanish independent living modes of doing 'emancipatory networks of knowledge' (Centeno, 2009), ETS can be considered an interesting exploration in collaborative modes that related to particular forms of engagement and co-activation around research.[5] Ours was a paroxysmal state of ongoing convulsion, sadness and suffering, but also full of moments of sheer joy and exaltation with many being drawn into calls for action, feeling moved and 'taken' by different and previously incompatible kinds of collective explorations: From actions around the monstrous problem of mortgages and evictions to the expansion of DIY practices and collective architecture; from a renewal of movements searching for a re-democratisation of institutions and decision-making or even for the transformation of political topologies (e.g. Catalan independence movements or the creation of new political platforms, but also emerging trans-feminist, environmentalist,

decolonisation and independent-living movements) to street-level democratic initiatives in social (i.e. anarchist-related, commons-led) spaces. This, of course, is not particularly new if one pays attention to the impact of, say, feminist or disability rights activist agendas in different strands of post-ANT research. But, in our case, it decisively contributed to activate us as ANT-inspired researchers:[6] Something we felt when engaging with such an open and 'self-experimental' ethos to create alternative research relations and to collaboratively forge other tales or accounts.[7]

The 15-M's political effervescence produced alternative knowledges that impacted on established forms of expertise and markets (cf. Roelvink et al., 2015). But in there we also witnessed a repertoire of activism going beyond the classic ANT concern with the 'translation of knowledge' (*research in the wild*) or the 'modulation of markets' (*concerned groups*). The 15-M, in turn, created the conditions of what could be called *wild research*: That is, a form of activism that entailed different forms of gathering together laypeople, social scientists, long-time activists and designers in exploratory practices in and through where all involved felt activated to engage in alternative and always collaborative forms of research. This meant avoiding ready-made solutions and explanations, giving centre stage to the ones usually left aside, and promoting an innovative exploration of arranging worlds together with many others having the experience, capability and the means to describe and transform them in new and creative ways.

Rather than a desire to produce 'situated interventions,' it was this collaborative intensity that 'activated' us, as researchers, towards other modes of moving and activating research, and through which we also put others in motion.[8] This was also what activated our particular modes of 'speaking well' of these activist practices (cf. Rodríguez-Giralt et al., 2018), something we attempted in and through documentary and academic activities, but also engaging in research interventions that facilitated particular forms of what we could call, following our epistemic partners' modes of relating, 'joint problem-making' (Criado & Rodríguez-Giralt, 2016): That is, ways of problematising – both materially transforming and conceptually accounting – their own worlds together with others (a friend from ETS joyfully called this a practice of 'adding up our fates,' which is probably a more appropriate register than the one around care). In fact, 'joint problem-making' also became a particular mode in which Tomás engaged ethnographically in activities of note-taking (Criado, 2018); ETS's documentation being not just a note-taking device 'from the field' – for ETS members to narrate their undertakings – but a fundamental space in the articulation of that very field as a joint research space for all involved. These forms of joint problem-making also developed into manifold 'experimentally collaborative' research endeavours (Criado & Estalella, 2018), when we hosted events where our friends and colleagues could present their ideas in public, and where different approaches to DIY could be shown and demonstrated; or in bringing our counterparts so that they could present on an equal footage in academic venues; or in co-writing texts, open design tutorials and blog posts with reflections about our experiences in common.

Conclusions

In this text, we have explored what happens to ANT when we engage in activist ecologies. We have done this through the particular reflection of our involvement in a particular instance of the 15-M and independent living movements in Spain, and how they affected or, rather, 'activated' alternative modes of engaging in these particular ecologies. We believe ETS to be a good case to think with about the different issues arising when trying to experiment with more collaborative, engaged and action-oriented ways of doing ANT research. In particular,

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we have expanded on a particular mode of ethnographic 'joint problem-making' as a concrete strategy to do this. But this is far from the only possibility in which ANT's research modes could be experimented upon, if not repurposed, when engaging in activist practices. In what ways could ANT be reshaped when engaging in other activist settings? Or, rather, can ANT be a form of activism?

In pointing out all this, our hope would be that ANT could become a more open and nonconformist research space: An 'activated' practice, problematising in newer ways the relationship between description and action, exploring the manifold ways of being an analyst or a researcher that might be available when engaging in these settings. This does not necessarily mean a call to engage in normative or programmatic interventionist agendas. On the contrary, it might mean developing a more careful, curious and situated *ethos*, whereby newer understandings of normativity and the politics of research, including experimental forms of joint problem-making, could be developed through particular ways of relating to or, rather, 'becoming activated' as ANT researchers in, activist ecologies.

Notes

1 Stimulated by the inclusive and participatory atmosphere of 15-M movement, several 'functionally diverse people' – most with activist backgrounds in the Spanish Independent Living Movement – congregated in the Spanish squares and created commissions of 'functional diversity' (Arenas & Pié, 2014). These commissions created the conditions for engaging in lively discussions about the several challenges faced by the functionally diverse and the empowering dynamics taking place in the squares.

2 For a story of the ramp's open prototyping, see Criado et al. (2016) where we detail how the 'inclined plane' of the ramp was an experimental space, putting to a test given care arrangements, and allowing tinkering with alternative ones.

3 For instance, Cozzens (1993) reflected on whether STS could be considered a social movement in itself.

4 A classic reference of STS work on technoscientific activism is, perhaps, Epstein's (1996) on AIDS and the 'impure science' of ACT-UP interventions. But other interesting have arisen in the last decades, such as 'embodied health movements' (Brown, 1997), 'evidence-based activism' (Rabeharisoa et al., 2014) or 'technoscience otherwise' (Murphy, 2012). Besides, activism and social movements have been at the background of relevant moves in STS ways of addressing public engagement in science and technology, from the work on 'civic epistemologies' (Jasanoff, 2005) to the more recent emphasis on 'material publics' (Marres & Lezaun, 2011).

5 At that time of the main 15-M mobilisations, we were both starting a collective research project called EXPDEM: 'Political Action of Groups Concerned with the Promotion of Independent-Living in Spain' (funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Competitiveness grant CSO2011-29749-C02-02). In an explicit gesture towards forms of 'emancipatory research' (Oliver, 1992), the EXPDEM project was conceived from the onset including different activist members as part of its advisory board and as co-researchers (Antonio, one of ETS's members being one of them). With this, we aimed to prevent researchers from 'speaking for the other' (cf. Ruby, 1992) and to create instances of friction and shared reflection.

6 These issues were articulated in *RedesCTS*, the STS space/network where many ANT-oriented researchers in the Spanish context regularly met. For a polyphonic account of it, check the collective video, produced as a report of the 2013 *¿Y si no me lo creo? | What if I don't buy it?* meeting in Barcelona, available at https://redescts.wordpress.com/archive/

7 Indeed, in this we also felt the inspiration of the 15-M movement, which had entailed in a brutal explosion of forms of documentary 'open-sourcing' – in digital platforms, booklets, zines, blogs or how-to guides – whereby our cities were turned into 'infrastructures of apprenticeship' (cf. Corsín & Estalella, 2016).

8 After disassembling the notion of the social and interrogating the concept of movement, Latour has recently rearticulated the notion of social movement to put forward a politics that *moves* individuals into *active* engagement and dialogue (Latour et al., 2018).

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