

Steve Woolgar and Daniel Neyland. *Mundane Governance: Ontology and Accountability*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK 2013. 282 pages.

How do processes and practices of governance and accountability operate in connection with mundane activities such as recycling, driving, and passing through airport security, and especially with the objects and technologies implicated in those mundane activities? This is the question addressed in this interesting book, which sets out to argue that 'STS inclined re-conceptualizations of objects and technology can offer new understandings of the nature and practice of governance' (p. 3). In particular, the book argues for the fruitfulness of a particular form of ontologically-focused and ethnomethodologically-informed STS. Both these aims are addressed through considering empirical material gathered between 2004 and 2006 at a remarkable number of field sites where the mundane domains of traffic, recycling/waste management, and airports are enacted. The rich descriptions of these varied field sites, which are satisfying and abundant, are a core pleasure of the book for the reader. It is fascinating to see inside sites with which we are thoroughly familiar but rarely think about: the work of authorities determining where to put speed cameras, and at what speed to issue infringement tickets; airport managers trying to figure out how to induce passengers to remove all sharp objects and liquids from their persons prior to security so that they have more time to spend in airport shops; and local government teams wondering about citizens' recycling practices.

Governance has attracted increasing analytic attention in recent years, notably accounting for an entire theme at EASST 2014 (governance in practice). Woolgar and Neyland stake their claims to novelty in focusing on governance in mundane settings, which are often overlooked, and in bringing to bear a number of classic and more recent ideas from STS. The focus here is on how governance is constituted in action, and they argue that a good way to investigate this question is to look for relations of accountability – who is accountable to whom, when, and how this relation is constituted in practice. Accountability is understood in an ethnomethodological sense, as a making available for mutual interrogation as part of a joint sense-making endeavour. This is an approach which emphasises meaning making's moment by moment achievement. The authors are particularly interested in how mundane objects and technologies might figure in these relations of accountability, and argue that most studies of governance tend to overlook this question. One term they introduce in their attempts to rectify this oversight is that of a 'governance pair', referring to a pair of entities (household/recycling box, car/driver, plane passenger/'sharp' objects) that are made to hold together in order to be accountable, or fail to hold together and hence prevent accountability relations and therefore governance (biometric data in an ID card trial/human body to which it should correspond).

In line with the authors' desire to demonstrate the usefulness of STS to a study of the practices of governance, a number of familiar STS themes are prominent. Demonstrating the labour required to achieve, or in their preferred term constitute, the world and its entities is emphasised throughout the book; the particular way in which they conceptualise constitution will be discussed in more detail later. A second familiar theme is that of messiness. The first five chapters are chiefly focused on demonstrating the messiness of governance-in-action through stories of their fieldwork, juxtaposed with narratives of governance as straightforward, provided by theorists of other persuasions (mostly management/organisation theorists and neo-Foucauldians such as Nikolas Rose) and also by certain actors in their field sites (the Handbook for speed camera partnerships, for example, and the management consultancy which produced it). The status of 'structure' or 'context' as requiring explanation, rather than being a mechanism of explanation, is also emphasised. Other STS themes that appear more briefly include the role of classification in constituting the world as it is (chapter 3), the role of evidence-making in constituting entities as-they-are (chapter 4) and the need for ongoing repair to these classifications (chapter 4). Spaces (of governance) as constituted in practice are also given a chapter, although the authors do not engage with other STS-influenced work on space, preferring instead to refer to Foucauldian and ethnomethodological influences.

The main theoretical point that the authors seek to make throughout the book, however, and key to their aim to evaluate different aspects of STS for their utility in understanding governance, is a focus on the 'ontological constitution' of the people and objects involved in relations

of accountability and governance in their field sites. This focus is framed as a shift away from epistemology and 'traditional' ontology (such as in the natural sciences, studying what is), to studying 'when, where and how objects and technologies are 'achieved', that is, how they are apprehended and experienced' (p. 17). For Woolgar and Neyland, the process of ontological constitution is about how an entity comes to have and maintain a certain ontological status, how it (temporarily) comes 'to possess certain properties or characteristics' (p. 38). For them, the ontology of an object is about property-having, rather than about how it acts in a particular situation; it is not relational. Some entities are constituted as ontologically uncertain and may turn out not to be as they appear, such as a letter which may turn out to be a bomb, or a water bottle that turns out to be a terror object in virtue of its path through the airport.

This focus on ontological constitution provides a useful framework for a detailed analysis of the workings of their field sites, and draws attention to practices and their ephemeral constitutions of entities. The ontological constitution of entities is generally said to lead to the enactment of particular governance and accountability relations, but at times it is said to work the other way, and ontologies are constituted by governance relations; the authors comment that neither version quite captures what they mean to say.

A nice aspect of the term 'ontological constitution' is the insistence that moral order and what they call 'actionability', the possibilities for action and appropriate actions that the entity supports, are all rendered as part of this process of constitution, rather than as occurring afterwards. The means by which constitution is described as occurring are, however, largely social, such as the decisions made by households about

what to put in their recycling box and by drivers about whether to slow down for a speed camera, the conversations and disagreements between council workers, and the leaflets and notice boards that attempt to induce a separation between air passengers and their water bottles and 'sharps.' In the stories these authors tell, the actions through which ontological constitution occurs are primarily human actions.

The authors note early on that an approach which has ontology as achieved implies that the distinction between human and non-human is itself constituted, and that this constitution enacts a profound politics (p. 52-3), a point also made by Donna Haraway (1997, for example) and Helen Verran (2001), among others. I would have liked this observation to have been taken further, but it seems to have 'gotten lost' in the work of studying ontological constitutions through the actions of humans, and as apprehension and sense-making. These concerns pull towards a divide between those entities which make sense (humans), and those which do not. Woolgar and Neyland reject 'material' approaches to analysis which *begin* with an assumption that agency in a given setting may lie with any of the entities, human or not. They argue that 'current emphases on materiality tend to bestow entities with a form of agency, which distracts from an investigation of how entities get to be material in the first place' (footnote 11, p. 37).

This book attempts to balance the interests of two rather distinct audiences: readers interested in governance and accountability who are assumed as in need of being convinced of the utility of STS analysis; and an STS audience whom they wish to convince of the fruitfulness of their particular conception of ontological constitution, and methodological and

theoretical approaches. This is a difficult task and the needs of the first audience are more comprehensively met.

So what are the 'take home messages' for an STS audience? The authors are of the opinion that an analytic frame of ontological enactment requires further elaboration. An obvious response to this would be to ask why then did they not more fully engage with the work of other contemporary analysts working on this elaboration. Yet, readers must agree they have provided much food for thought. In particular I would recommend this book to junior STS scholars, because of its helpful reiteration of classic STS themes, the nice way that the authors weave together analysis and empirical material, and the methodologically interesting discussion in the final chapter of how they shaped their text.

References

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- Verran, H. (2001) *Science and an African Logic* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press).

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