

This is not a pipeline.

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Review of: Andrew Barry (2013) *Material Politics: Disputes Along the Pipeline*. Wiley-Blackwell: London

When asked to explain to confused family and friends what it is I do as a human geographer, I tend to fall back on a rather tired refrain. It's also one which I try to make feel a little less tired during tutorials with first year undergraduate students. What I/we do is look at the relationships between society and space. I mean it is as a very genuine complement that Andrew Barry's *Material Politics* has made me interested, again and in new ways, in what it is that I do. Barry looks at the specificities of, and debates surrounding, the construction of the 1760km long Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean as a way of introducing materiality into the study of "knowledge controversies". But, more fundamentally, he offers us some exceptionally rich provocations for rethinking the relationship between space and society. The former emerges as a tableau of subtle geographies: the spatiality of non-bounded controversies (pages 10-11); the notion of an energy corridor (30); affected communities 2km either side of the pipeline (102); the complex topologies of impact (120); and the pipeline not as a network or territory but as a series of dispersed events (122). Material as both space and geography here is not a stable ground for human disputes but something that is both performed and regulated. The book, Barry correctly claims, is a "geographical puzzle" (27), riddling out sites of significance along the pipeline and quizzing them; why you? why here?

To, and by, this space Barry's social emerges through his political. More specifically, we get fascinatingly empirical examples of the often overly-theoretical phenomenon of the "post-political". He documents floods of information drowning out discussion and debate, but never in biblical enough proportions such that archipelagos of dissent do not survive and emerge. The transparency of BP (formerly "British Petroleum, rebranded in 2000 to "Beyond Petroleum") and other agencies therefore attempted to foreclose political activity against the pipeline's construction and to provide the "catalytic surface" (18) upon which any future challenges would be played out. Transparency itself therefore emerges as an anti-radical tactic for the management of affect and of the crowd, allowing ethical criticisms of oil while attempting to guide and frame these debates. The post-political here often takes the form of frustrating oxymorons and challenges: what does transparency mask (12)? Why is a place without a free market or its infrastructures implicitly corrupt (58)? What new secrets does openness create (59)? How does an archive manage the public through what it doesn't contain (71)? And how long can you ponder these questions before you become tired and go home, deserting the barricade?

This is brilliantly frustrating work, and I would like to focus the rest of my comments on the book as a composite whole of necessary and considered annoyances. The comments address the way the book is written, the thinkers it uses and how, and its possible contribution to critical human geography. Against REF (Research Excellence Framework) naysayers and journal paper citation addicts, *Material Politics* emphatically makes the case for the monograph. It, quite simply, could not be decomposed into a series of articles because the argument iteratively composes itself across and circuitously through the chapters. By progressively dashing your hopes and expectations regarding

how a book about material and politics should read, the structure of the book forces a rethinking of the “material”. The first few chapters really do contain very little material at all, though they’re full of content. By page 50 I was getting increasingly irritated and just wanted something *more ferrous*; a description of the pipeline, its contours and hollows and echoes and metallic gurglings. This is a desire that is left intentionally wanting, because Barry insists that appreciating the role of material in politics involves appreciating the relationship between material and information. To the readers’ obvious and ingrained assumptions about what a material pipe is *and* how we should approach it Barry replied “this is not a pipe” (channelling René Magritte via the historian of systems of thought Michel Foucault and the artist Mamuka Japharidze, 185-186). Even in chapter seven, where metal features most centrally, the emphasis is on writings about metal and metallurgy and debates in the British House of Commons about the efficacy of a piping sealant. One wonders what forms of material description Barry might have used that would not have surrendered his determination to situate material within information debates and circuits, a task not dissimilar to cultural geographical explorations of landscape and power. This approach would, perhaps, have diverted greater attention to the visual aspects of the pipeline, as considered more broadly. The maps in the book are not from the pipe archive, while we see very little of the pipe itself (much of which is, of course, underground, and there is a brilliant photograph of the subterranean pipe’s signposted invisibility on 117). What of the doubtless tens of thousands of maps drawn up to make the case for, and against, the route which must have cartographed and counter-cartographed the metal-material pipe through reams of paper-material maps?

Barry is a renowned theorist without and within Geography and this comes through on every page, through his rigorous citations and the language and structure of the book. We are introduced to hosts of theorists, some of whom are contemporary and living (Latour, Strathern) or contemporary and dead (Deleuze, Foucault) while others are considered to be more historical. The insights from the latter will be new to many readers, and I learned a lot through the passages detailing Georg Simmel’s work on “publicity’s invasion of the affairs of the state” (56) and A.N. Whitehead’s writings on abstraction (119). The more contemporary thinkers were introduced critically with, for instance, Foucault’s governmentality work being censored for its failure to relay the contingency and passion of life (16). But the historical thinkers were critically situated less well, if at all. This is particularly the case with Gabriel Tarde, whose suggestion that the crowd “had something animal about it” as opposed to the opinion-based consensus of publics is mentioned without context or critique (135). Tarde here deploys a tried and tested discursive trope for dismissing and othering the non-elite, whether the urban working classes or the rural subaltern: “The omission [of sovereign consciousness] is indeed dyed into most narratives by metaphors assimilating peasants revolts to natural phenomena: they break out like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics. In other words, when the proverbial clod of earth turns, this is a matter to be explained in terms of natural history.” (Guha, 1983, 46)

If in this case the “critical” was explicitly lacking, it is an urge and compulsion that courses through the rest of the book. But, just as the ‘material’ does not come as we might expect, so with the critical. This is not a book about big, bad oil. Barry refuses to identify heroes and villains, just as he refuses to compare businesses to how they match their own commitments. Rather, he examines why and how accounts of ethical business are produced, through social and environmental impact assessments, community investments, marketing and public relations, reputational risk management and engagement with stakeholders and publics. Again, if one looks for an easy guide for being critical

of material politics here, one will be frustrated. But it is also difficult to extract from Barry's brilliantly complex structure and argument a broader lesson regarding how to be critical. I would suggest that the clearest hint we get to this comes in Barry's work on the archive (not a major emphasis of the book, but one which rivals in complexity and rigour that of Stoler, 2009). In part this addresses the archives made available by BP. But it is perhaps telling that the Foucault that is most prominent here is that of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, in which the archive is re-interpreted as "...the general system of the formation and transformation of statements." (Foucault, 1972, 130, original emphasis) In his expert explorations of the archive, its post-politics, materialities and controversies, might Barry be proposing strategies for critical human geographies of a more encompassing discursive archive, that floods us with its openness, but doesn't drown out the possibility of being human, of being geographical, and of being critical?

References

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