CRITICAL THEORY AND NEW MATERIALISMS

Edited by
Hartmut Rosa, Christoph Henning
and Arthur Bueno

ROUTLEDGE

Critical Theory and New Materialisms

Bringing together authors from two intellectual traditions that have, so far, generally developed independently of one another – critical theory and new materialism – this book addresses the fundamental differences and potential connections that exist between these two schools of thought. With a focus on some of the most pressing questions of contemporary philosophy and social theory – in particular, those concerning the status of long-standing and contested separations between matter and life, the biological and the symbolic, passivity and agency, affectivity and rationality – it shows that recent developments in both traditions point to important convergences between them and thus prepare the ground for a more direct confrontation and cross-fertilization. The first volume to promote a dialogue between critical theory and new materialism, this collection explores the implications for contemporary debates on ecology, gender, biopolitics, post-humanism, economics and aesthetics. As such, it will appeal to philosophers, social and political theorists, and sociologists with interests in contemporary critical theory and materialism.

Hartmut Rosa is Professor of Sociology at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena and Director of the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt, Germany. He is the author of *Resonance: A Sociology of the Relationship to the World* and *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* and the coeditor of *Lost in Perfection: Impacts of Optimisation on Culture and Psyche*.

Christoph Henning is Philosophy Fellow at the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies, University of Erfurt, Germany. He is the author of *Philosophy after Marx: 100 Years of Misreadings and the Normative Turn in Political Philosophy* and the coeditor of *The Good Life beyond Growth: New Perspectives* and *Social Capital, Social Identities: From Ownership to Belonging*.

Arthur Bueno is Lecturer and Research Fellow at the University of Frankfurt, Visiting Professor at the University of São Paulo and President of the Georg Simmel Gesellschaft in Bielefeld, Germany. He is the author of *Economies of Life: Simmel on Money and Art* and the coeditor of *De-Centering Global Social Theory and Research: The Peripheral Turn in Sociology*.

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Contents

Notes on contributors

Kerstin Andermann is a lecturer in philosophy at the University Leipzig, Germany. She has a background in phenomenology and philosophies of difference as well as in early modern philosophy. Her particular fields of interest are philosophies of the body and the emotions, affect theory, political and social theory. She has just published a book on Spinoza and his theory of immanent individuation.

Claire Blencowe lectures sociology at the University of Warwick, UK. Selected publications include "Disenchanting secularism (or the cultivation of soul) as pedagogy in resistance to populist racism and colonial structures in the academy", *BERJ* (2020); *Biopolitical Experience: Foucault, Power & Positive Critique* (2012); *Authority, Experience & the Life of Power* (2014), *Problems of Participation* (2013) and *Problems of Hope* (2017).

Arthur Bueno is Lecturer and Research Fellow at the University of Frankfurt and Visiting Professor at the University of São Paulo. He is currently President of the Georg Simmel Gesellschaft (Bielefeld) and member of the research centers Normative Orders (Frankfurt) and Law & Democracy (São Paulo). He was an Alexander von Humboldt Postdoctoral Fellow at the Max Weber Center at the University of Erfurt and at the University Paris Nanterre. He is the author of *Economies of Life: Simmel on Money and Art* (Routledge, forthcoming) and coeditor of special issues on "The Politics of Social Suffering" and "Marx & Simmel", among other publications. His research interests include critical theory, social philosophy, forms of subjectivity and social suffering.

Heike Delitz, PD Dr., studied architecture, sociology and philosophy. She teaches sociological theory at the University of Bamberg, Germany. Her main research areas include sociological theory, history of sociological thought (in particular, history of French sociological thought), cultural sociology and comparative sociology. She is currently researching the social significance of architectures, comparing different "architectural modes of collective existence".

Rick Dolphijn is Associate Professor of Arts and Society at the Department of Humanities, Utrecht University, and Honorary Professor of Comparative

Literature at the University of Hong Kong (2017–2023). He published widely on new materialism, material culture (food studies), post-humanism and the arts. Currently, he is PI in the HERA project FOOD2GATHER.

Elmar Flatschart is Lecturer at the Department of International Development, University of Vienna. His research interests include a wide area of theoretical debates: critical theory (Frankfurt School, critical-dialectical theories of society), philosophy of science (critical realism), materialist state theory, critique of political economy, materialist-feminist approaches, political ecology (with a focus on energy as social relation) and social movements (with a focus on direct-democratic participation processes).

Petra Gümplová obtained her PhD from the New School for Social Research in 2010. Her book *Sovereignty and Constitutional Democracy* was published in 2011 with Nomos. Since 2015 she has been Annemarie Schimmel Fellow at Max-Weber-Kolleg, University of Erfurt. Her research is in the field of international political theory, international law and global justice and focuses on natural resources.

Christoph Henning is Philosophy Fellow at the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt, Germany. He studied in Berlin, Dresden and New York, and taught in Switzerland and Lake Konstanz before coming to Erfurt. His most recent books include *Philosophy after Marx* (Brill, 2014), *Theories of Alienation* (German, Junius, 2015), *The Political Philosophy* of *Perfectionism* (German, Campus, 2015), *Marx and the Aftermath* (Metzler, 2017) and *Creativity as a Vocation* (German, with D. Thomae and F. Schultheis, Transcript, 2019), as well as the collection *The Good Life Beyond Growth: New Perspectives* (Routledge, 2017; with Hartmut Rosa) and other collected volumes and special issues. He published widely on topics of critical theory, happiness and political philosophy.

Christoph Menke is Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main. Book publications in English include *The Sovereignty of Art. Aesthetic Negativity after Adorno and Derrida* (MIT Press, 1998), *Reflections of Equality* (Stanford UP, 2006), *Tragic Play. Tragedy. Irony and Theater from Sophocles to Beckett* (Columbia UP, 2009), *Force. A fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology*, Fordham UP 2012; *Law and Violence. Christoph Menke in Dialogue* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018) and *Critique of Rights* (London: Polity Press 2020).

Kai Merten is Professor of British Literary Studies at the University of Erfurt, where he has founded the Erfurt Network on New Materialism. His research interests include British literature of the Romantic age and of the 20th century, literature and media studies, literature and theatricality and New Materialism. An edited collection on *Diffractive Reading* is forthcoming with Rowman & Littlefield International. He has also edited collections on postcolonial media theory, cultural alterity around 1800, and literature and knowledge.

Hartmut Rosa is Professor of Sociology at the University of Jena, Co-director of the Kolleg Postwachstumsgesellschaften in Jena (with Klaus Dörre) and Director of the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt. His areas of study include theories of modernity, sociology of time, communitarianism, theories of property and social theory. He is the author of *Resonance: A Sociology of the Relationship to the World* (Polity Press, 2019), *Sociology, Capitalism, Critique* (Verso, 2015; with Klaus Dörre and Stephan Lessenich), *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (Columbia UP, 2013), and *Alienation and Acceleration. Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality* (NSU Press, 2010), among many others, and is coeditor of the journal *Time & Society*.

Martin Saar is Professor of Social Philosophy at the Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main. His areas of specialization and teaching refer to contemporary political and social philosophy and the history of early modern and modern political thought (esp. Spinoza, Nietzsche, Marx, Foucault, critical theory, post-structuralism, and interdisciplinary research on collective memory, affect, ideology, democracy and power).

Charles Taylor is Professor Emeritus at McGill University. He is known for his contributions to political philosophy, the philosophy of social science, history of philosophy and intellectual history. This work has earned him the prestigious Kyoto Prize, the Templeton Prize, the Berggruen Prize for Philosophy and the John W. Kluge Prize. His latest books include *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Harvard UP, 2016), *Retrieving Realism* (Harvard UP, 2011; with H. Dreyfus) and *A Secular Age* (Harvard UP, 2007).

Arne Johan Vetlesen is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oslo. Starting out as a moral philosopher focusing on the role of emotions in evildoing, he has in later years moved to environmental philosophy, understood as an interdisciplinary undertaking involving anthropology and sociology. He has published more than 20 books, among them *Evil and Human Agency* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), *The Denial of Nature* (Routledge, 2015) and *Cosmologies of the Anthropocene: Panpsychism, Animism, and the Limits of Posthumanism* (Routledge, 2019).

1 Introduction

Critical Theory and New Materialisms – fit, strain or contradiction?

Hartmut Rosa, Christoph Henning and Arthur Bueno

This volume assembles contributions from authors of two intellectual currents that have, so far, mostly developed at a safe distance: Critical Theory and New Materialism. Its intention is to cover new ground and survey the terrain between these two schools of thought by addressing their fundamental differences as well as their potential connections. At the center of this debate are some of the most pressing questions of contemporary philosophy and social theory – in particular, those concerning the status of long-standing and contested separations between matter and life, the biological and the symbolic, passivity and agency, affectivity and rationality. While, at first sight, critical theorists and new materialists may seem to adopt completely different stances with regard to these issues, recent developments in both traditions point to important convergences between them and hence prepare the ground for a more direct confrontation and cross-fertilization.

Born out of the spirit of "old" historical materialism, Critical Theory has often, and quite paradoxically, been viewed as taking an excessive distance toward the physical and biological materiality of the world. By understanding itself as a post-metaphysical continuation of the "incomplete project" of Kantian Enlightenment, it has recently anchored its political horizon in intersubjective practices of rational communication (Jürgen Habermas), recognition (Axel Honneth) and justification (Rainer Forst). Despite their differences, these approaches have all been criticized for holding anthropocentric conceptions of nature and rationalist ideas of society, which ultimately derive from their reliance on the philosophical tradition of German idealism (Allen 2017). By consequence, critics argue, the material, vital and affective aspects of our world are glossed over or subordinated to intersubjective processes of normative reasoning (Vetlesen 2015). Such a view, however, has not remained uncontested. Recent works within Critical Theory have sought to overcome these limitations by resorting to other intellectual traditions and most notably by reopening the discussion on what can be called Romanticism's "incomplete project". Putting forward the concept of resonance – understood as a two-way responsive relationship of being moved by something external as well as being able to reach out and move someone or something "out there" – Hartmut Rosa (2019) has brought bodily activities and relations to nature more strongly back into Critical Theory, establishing a potential connection to lines of thought developed by the Romantics (cf. Taylor 2016; Löwy 2001; Gottlieb 2016; Goldstein

2017). Similarly, Martin Saar and Christoph Menke have opened new paths for Critical Theory by connecting it to philosophical arguments stemming from the Romantic tradition or bearing important affinities with it. Turning to Herder and Nietzsche, Menke (2013) has argued that human experience cannot be simply understood along the lines of a cognitivist theory of action, with its appeal to subjective faculties and capabilities, but must take into account the vital and unconscious dynamics of "force". In dialogue with works not immediately associated with the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, such as those of Gilles Deleuze, Antonio Negri and Étienne Balibar, Saar (2013) has claimed that Spinoza's political ontology, with its emphasis on the material and affective dimensions of power, represents an alternative to restricted perspectives on modern Enlightenment and a crucial contribution to contemporary social critique.

These developments have resulted in internal tensions and a series of new debates within Critical Theory. Indeed, several advocates of Enlightenment's "unfinished project" are worried that there might be something intrinsically conservative about such a distancing from the intersubjective dynamics of rational communication, recognition and justification. In their view, the enhanced emphasis on the corporeal, the vital and the affective runs the risk of depriving Critical Theory of the rational grounds it has established for social criticism. From this perspective, the new tendencies within this field resemble the poststructuralist theories criticized by Habermas in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1990). A major stake in this debate is whether such an orientation beyond rationality leads to an unavoidable conservatism or whether it might result in an even more radical view and critique of modern life. In this regard, the reproachful parallel between the "neo-Romantic" turn in Critical Theory and poststructuralist theories might not be inconsistent and even prove to be a productive one for the approaches under critique.

A similar shift toward nature, life and affect has taken place in poststructuralist, feminist, and science and technology debates in the second half of the 1990s, involving a number of theories that Rosi Braidotti (1994) and Manuel DeLanda (1996) were the first to designate as "new materialism" or "neo-materialism" (cf. Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012; Goll, Keil and Telios 2013). Such endeavors were marked by a clear attempt – parallel to the efforts of contemporary critical theorists in relation to their own field – to move further beyond the limits of the "linguistic turn". A defining feature of those works is, above all, the problematization of dualisms that strands of modern thought, especially those identified with the Enlightenment, have advanced in rather restrictive and hierarchical terms: matter versus life, biological versus symbolic life, passivity versus agency, affectivity versus rationality. Confronting these dualistic conceptions, Karen Barad (2007) set out to reframe the relations between human and nonhuman beings as "intra-actions" (cf. Merten 2021), Jane Bennett (2010) has questioned the fundamental distinction between matter and life by proposing a "critical vitalist" perspective (see also Delitz 2015), and Elizabeth Grosz (2011) has questioned the boundaries between biological and symbolical life (see also Blencowe 2012). A further consequence of this overlap between domains generally regarded as separate is that

the post-humanist potentials raised by new technological developments can be considered – in both their negative and positive effects – in continuity with matter, life and affect and not simply in opposition to them (Braidotti 2013; Braidotti and Dolphijn 2017).

Recent developments within Critical Theory and New Materialism thus point to a potential convergence between these two intellectual currents. Despite their different origins, they have both been attempting to put into question and overcome the limitations of anthropocentric rationalism. However, there remain important differences in the way each of these currents proceeds in this regard. While contemporary critical theorists mostly understand their task as one of complementing or enlarging the boundaries of Enlightenment thought through the recourse to other traditions, new materialists seek to develop a more radical questioning of modern thought and a more direct engagement with the entangled nature of matter, life, affect and technology. By consequence, those working in the field of Critical Theory often appear to the advocates of New Materialism as too much caught up within an anthropocentric and language-based perspective, whereas the latter are frequently seen by the former as too readily abandoning important distinctions between human and nonhuman nature, being and appearance, epistemology and ontology. Hence, the fact that these two intellectual fields share an underlying commitment to move beyond anthropocentric rationalism, but carry out such a project with very distinct intellectual strategies, provides the grounds for highly consequential debates in contemporary philosophy and social theory.

Yet, surprisingly, so far there has been no serious attempt to engage in such a discussion. Part of the reason for this lies precisely in the different strategies employed by these two intellectual currents in their common effort to go beyond the limits of the project of enlightened modernity. Although they agree in the goal, the paths adopted by each of them are fundamentally different. While it is true that both Critical Theory and New Materialism are marked by internal dissensions, at the basis of each of them lies a distinctive set of epistemological, ontological and practical presuppositions. These are, indeed, some of the dimensions in which Critical Theory and New Materialism can be seen as adopting divergent or even diametrically opposed positions, and which therefore shape the debates presented in this book. The core of their disagreements in these regards, as well as the locus of their potential convergences, can be identified in their differing conceptions of nature.

Critical Theory and the problem of nature

For Critical Theory, "nature" is the name of a problem. For a long time in history, the oppression and exploitation of the poor, of women, of workers and minorities, as well as the clashes between political powers that brought destruction and misery onto so many, seemed to be *natural facts*. These phenomena had been addressed by political economy – from Hobbes to Malthus and beyond – as explicable by means of "natural laws". The economic system blamed for the class society was evolving with iron and merciless necessity, as if carried out by human lemmings

controlled by natural instincts, so that it, too, appeared as a part of nature (and salvation could only come from above, by messianic intervention, which early socialism as well as later scholars like Walter Benjamin conceived in religious terms). Accordingly, sciences dealing with these "natural" processes were deemed *natural sciences*: either formulating irrevocable laws (as political economy did) or gathering social phenomena as if they were things (as in positivist social sciences). Yet even more harmful for the vulnerable segments of the population than the liberal naturalization of the modern state, society and economy were *social Darwinist* conceptions posed against liberalism from the late 19th century onward. These relied on ideas of nature that appeared even more cruel and heartless than the liberal ones (though there are many who later addressed their continuities). Natural selection was ultimately interpreted as a "racial conflict", so that segregation by color and "race" or even genocide could appear as natural phenomena. In such a context, the task of Critical Theory was seen to consist in the undoing or de-naturalization of the "natural" fixity of established beliefs, authoritarian habits, sexual and racial norms, and so on.

Under these circumstances, progressive thinking often assumed that in order to make room for freedom and emancipation the realm of nature had to be curtailed. While in practice this led to its domination by science-driven technology and the exploitation and expropriation of natural "resources" (see Gümplová in this volume), in theory this meant to *de-naturalize* the driving forces of such processes, that is, to demystify them and to uncover their real "nature" – which was no longer natural. For critical theories, behind those dynamics was often non-nature, something more humane and social, more plastic and changeable: Reason, in the Kantian case, or Spirit, in the Hegelian variant, or even – only a small change from this perspective – culture and society. How "spiritualized" this anti-naturalist vision of society was can be seen from the strong focus on normativity and reason in recent debates within Critical Theory (cf. Henning 2014; Thompson 2016). In short, for the most part of the 20th century, to criticize was to de-naturalize, and to be critically minded meant to be a nonnaturalist.

What binds together these various approaches to nature's other (reason, spirit, culture or society) is that only in the latter the "realm of freedom" could be grounded. Only in most radical versions of these philosophies was the realm of freedom extended to cover nature as well (e.g., in Fichte's constructivism or Schelling's early speculations). However, as long as this spiritual form of freedom is not fully realized, we end up with (at least) two entities: nature and society, or first and second nature. And in fact, as Bruno Latour (2004) has rightly perceived with dark humor, Critical Theory in the 20th century can partly be interpreted as a "purification" game: all the naturalized sides of society (state and economy, classes and racial stereotypes, gender roles and behavioral norms) must be de-naturalized and de-materialized to "free" them from the curse of determinism and oppression. The impetus seems clear: *against nature* (cf. Vogel 1996; Morton 2009, Daston 2018). This mindset is evident from Hegel to Marx, from Lukács to Adorno and from Foucault to Judith Butler, and it has become hegemonic in many sociological theories of the past decades and until today. As a consequence,

the realm of nature became ever more irrelevant in theory – almost as a mirror image of the ongoing process of capitalist enclosures and ecological destruction in the "great outdoors" (Quentin Meillassoux). A crucial implication of this process is that the resulting strands of Critical Theory had surprisingly little to say on the ecological crisis (cf. Vetlesen in this volume), unless they could show that such a crisis is not "natural" but rather "normative". What interested Habermas in the green movement, for instance, was the movement and not the "green" thinking it developed.

As ecological problems became more and more pressing throughout the 20th century, many theories came to express and to address ecological concerns, among them feminist studies (Merchant 1980; Mies and Shiva 1993) and even Marxist approaches (Foster 2000). The mainstream of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, however, has not substantially changed its course; one can say it has centered even more on norms. Over time it became clear that, in order to actualize Critical Theory and enable it to cope with the current crisis, it needed to be refurbished and to come to terms with more "earthly matters" (see Rosa in this volume). It is at this point that a dialogue with New Materialisms becomes relevant.

New Materialism has evolved in writings mainly from poststructuralist feminism, but it is also inspired by approaches in the field of Science and Technology Studies (see Alaimo and Heckman 2008; Coole and Frost 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012). Its aim has been to leave behind intellectual traditions bounded by what appears as "dualisms" between epistemology and ontology, as well as between different areas of being such as nature and culture, mind and matter, or life and technology. It is aspiring for a new, decentered worldview that is no longer anthropocentric, hierarchical and detached but "monist" and open to the many interrelations and changes in the world we are part of. The ecological crisis, the subjugation of women and the wide-felt alienation are all attributed to a thinking that wrongly devaluated nonhuman matters as dead objects or meaningless processes. As its main opponents are epistemology (Kant in particular), the "old" materialism (Hobbes, Newton, or Marx and Engels) and dualistic ontologies (ascribed to Descartes or, with Latour, to "modernity" as a whole), at times it seems as if New Materialism wishes to overcome the modern critical mindset as well. There are some outspoken reservations indeed, at least against a criticism that juxtaposes "good" rational norms and "bad" empirical reality, or "good" humanity and "bad" technology (Latour 2004).

But is it sensible to jump into these matters without mediation, to withdraw the distinctions altogether, by assuming that "culture was nature all along" (Kirby 2017)? In other words, is a monist "New Materialism" the solution to the crisis of Critical Theory? As we will show in a minute, this is not as straightforward as it seems: too much can get lost on the way, and conceptual differences or incommensurabilities can complicate a mutual understanding between these two schools. It is therefore interesting to reconsider the new research on the history of critical theories: it has been shown by several authors in recent years that philosophies of nature, and in fact, even natural sciences, were much more important for critical

theories than the common narrative has it (which is often told as a continuous development toward present-day normativism; see, e.g., Habermas 2019).

Starting with Marx and Engels, whose "dialectical materialism" was itself based on studies of earth chemistry, organic and social metabolism, and environmental impacts (Foster 2000; Saito 2017), the importance of nature for society – and for notions of emancipation – was highlighted already by Adorno (Link 1986; Becker 1997; Cook 2011), Lukács (Henning 2020a), Benjamin or Marcuse (Feenberg 2009). Once the distinction between nature and society is accepted, one can also turn it around and criticize existing social relations on the basis of natural ones (as it has been done in Aristotle, Stoicism or natural law theories of the 17th and 18th centuries, or later by Freud or Dewey). But anti-naturalism kept an upper hand – sexism, classism, racist stereotypes, they all seemed to be backed by a belief in natural forces, so the safest way to be critical was to be "against nature". With the notable exception of Schmidt (1962, a commentary on Marx; or Görg 2003), critical theorists didn't quite get to develop their ideas on nature systematically. Therefore, the dispersed flashes of insight in some of their texts on "another" nature need to be uncovered and put in conversation with new materialist conceptual innovations. This is an endeavor that we want to start with in the present volume. For with New Materialism, we witness a new "naturalist turn" within the humanities.

New Materialism and the problem of nature

New Materialism as a social science approach is reacting to a different problem. It is concerned not with a threatening (second) nature, as in Critical Theory, but rather with the *crisis* of nature in practice and the disregard for ecological issues in social theory. In both these regards, new materialist authors start by questioning the subordination of nature. The basic impulse is to problematize the dualisms that characterize modern thought and practice. Modernity is seen as built on the basis of a central conceptual opposition: that between matter and spirit, in which the former appears not only as distinct but also as subordinated to the latter. Spirit stands for activity, value, transcendence; matter is passive and meaningless. For new materialists, this dualism explains both the limits of modern thought and its practical problems in ecological, racial and gender issues, among others. This is why it is necessary to question or "traverse" it (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012: 14f.). In contrast to the dualist or even transcendental humanist thought that predominates in modernity, New Materialisms propose a monist philosophy of immanence that focuses on matter and abstains from conceiving the latter as something inert and destined to be molded by spirit. The point here is not simply to emphasize one pole (matter) at the expense of the other (spirit) but rather to go beyond the very dualism that establishes them as poles. There should be no "prioritization", no foundation: it is not a question of posing matter against the spirit (or vice versa) but of thinking them in their mutual affirmation or co-constitution. Thus, instead of the dualism nature/spirit, what appears here is "natureculture", "material-discursive" or "material-semiotic". Instead of the interaction between

strictly delimited and contradictory elements, there is a continuous "intra-action" (Barad) of forces and matters in different states and degrees of consolidation.

Epistemologically, New Materialism aspires to the formulation of a transversal position that does not treat the elements of the world as already organized in terms of an opposition between matter and spirit, between the empirical and the transcendental, but rather explores their complex imbrications without assuming the priority of one element over the other – without even assuming that they are empirically clearly discernible from each other. In so doing, New Materialism takes distance from two other epistemological positions. It distinguishes itself, on the one hand, from a positivist biological determinism that essentializes nature, conceives of it as quasi-mechanical and explains everything else on the basis of it. But it also distinguishes itself, on the other hand, from a postmodern social constructivism which conceives of nature as mere matter (or "magma") to be molded by culture and, in doing so, inadvertently ends up falling into a reified social essentialism.

Gunnarson (2013) rightly suggests interpreting this as a "naturalistic turn". However, the philosophy of nature that is evolving here may not be an easy fix to the shortcomings of an anti-naturalist Critical Theory, not least because it raises a number of problems of its own. New Materialism's reaction to the excesses of constructivism and its attempt at avoiding dualisms entail an abandonment of distinctions that might nevertheless prove crucial for social critique as well as for its own project. A major insight that *started* the critical enterprise in the first place, with the publication of Kant's three *Critiques*, was precisely the differentiation between theory and reality, between epistemology and ontology. Following Latour and Barad, new materialists may be seen to forego this most elementary of all critical distinctions (see Rosa and Flatschart in this volume). But it has a number of bearings that are essential for Critical Theory, and which should perhaps not be given up too quickly. From a Critical Theory standpoint, the issues raised by New Materialism can be summarized as follows.

First, once this distinction is dropped, intellectual discourse and natural processes appear as one and the same thing (as "agential cuts" or "intra-actions" in Barad's terms; see the criticism in Moss 2017 and Vetlesen 2019), bringing external causality, organic self-preservation and intentional action on one "flat" level. On the upside, this leads to feelings of kinship, closeness and "response-ability" not only toward fellow human beings and animals but also toward landscapes, microbes, and even the universe as a whole (see Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; or Haraway 2016; and critically, Rekret 2016). In Critical Theory, Marcuse (1969) had already developed such a "new sensibility", and Rosa's concept of resonance (2019) aims at something similar. On the downside, however, this leveled field can lead to the notion that natural processes or ecological crises are "caused" by ideas some people have held for some time and that consequently it would be a solution to hardwired ecological problems if we changed our "thinking" about them – for example, if we no longer think in terms of subject and object, nature and culture, or mind and matter, but rather perceive them as a unity and approach them more affectively. Surely, thinking is a material process and its transformation does have

bearings on our future actions (this is a major assumption in ecological education, e.g.). But research shows that stated ecological consciousness does not go hand in hand with a more sustainable way of life, hence in itself it does not change any *thing*. Even if one must acknowledge the material aspect of thought and, correspondingly, the semiotic character of materiality, it may nevertheless be important to not lose sight of what separates certain material-semiotic practices – for example, the processes of ("intellectual") analysis and ("material") implementation. The Heideggerian notion that the state of the world depends on our thinking (or feeling) of it, on our "world-picture", may not overcome but rather *inflate* anthropocentrism and even a self-indulgent subjectivism, as it primarily focuses on our ideas and feelings. The hasty claim that with changed attitudes we already have captured all there *is* in reality can thus lead to a political quietism (see Rekret 2016, 2018; Moss 2017; Sparrow 2019, for a more detailed criticism).

Second, if an identity of being and thinking is assumed *without proper mediation*, an important critical tool is abandoned: the comparison of ideas with the part of reality they aim to describe, formerly called "ideology critique" and mocked as the "cult" of "anti-fetishism" by Latour (2013: 168). Is the difference between nationalist or racialized ecological conceptions, as they are on the rise in many countries, and a more inclusive, mindful and pluralist "compostism" intended by many new materialists fully grasped with a look at the mode of their "attunement" to the cosmos alone (see Blencowe in this volume, cf. Bellacasa 2017)? How do we respond to neoliberal or neofascist approaches to ecological problems once they *also* claim to be mindful to nature? Was the problem with earlier versions of naturalized politics – for example, the damnation of homosexuality as "unnatural" in religious approaches to natural law – really that they "excluded" nature (as the grand narrative of the "great divide" would have it), or rather that they *included* and used nature in a way that was both not in accordance with our scientific knowledge of nature and politically disrespectful of many groups? How do we account for these differences once what matters is reduced to whether or not an approach is dualist, or fluid and open? This might not be enough to cover the ground of political differences and contestations in the real world.

Third, there is no need to decry every distinction as a "dualism". As Gunnarson (2013: 14) puts it: "if we see distinctions as such as the problem, we rid ourselves of the possibility of examining the *relation* between the two terms and one will inevitably subsume the other". Even if entities are close-knit and rarely act or change in isolation (as persons in a family or a marriage, a family dog or trees in a forest), it is possible and sometimes useful to look at the entities or persons separately. This is neither atomistic nor dualistic; in fact, it enhances the plurality of perspectives, which would be lost if we only embrace the "assemblage", the *relations* between them. The personalities involved play a role, too. A closer look at the history of the "old" materialism, or at the history of critical theories from Kant to Lukács and beyond, reveals that a full-blown dualism (or a "mechanistic materialism", see Wolf 2017) has rarely been maintained. Quite to the contrary, the Hegelian heritage compels Critical Theory to take the unity behind the

differences into account. Unity in difference, however, is not a unity of "grey in grey", or a fusion; it calls for distinctions. To be critical, in a literal sense (from the Greek *krinein*, to distinguish), means to be *aware* of these differences, not melting them into one pot, without letting them undermine the coherence of the unity. This requires a lot of conceptual rigor; the art of seeing identity and difference *together* goes beyond the alternative between "dualisms" and a multiple "becoming" where everything is one.

Fourth, following this train of thought, we may stress that within a given unity there can be different gradations, magnitudes, stratifications, layers or "scales" (Moss 2017). If there is not just *one* "great divide" (between subject and object, nature and culture), there can be no one-off mediation, no immediate unity between just two entities. There is much more pluralism than the more rigid versions of those dualisms imply, but that does not take away our ability to differentiate. Take the seasons, for example: there is a clear phenomenological difference between summer and winter (hot and cold). Stressing their "unity" means to interpret both *as* seasons, and *as* recurring, but that neither denies nor abstracts away the differences in this unity. It is also clear that in-between them there are spring and autumn (with medium temperatures). So neither are we overcoming the "dualism" of summer and winter once we see their commonalities nor can we simply jump over spring and fall as stages or degrees between them. New Materialism rightly stresses that ontological levels can be used to construe *hierarchical* relations and can thus be ethically and politically problematic (such as mind is "higher" and hence more valuable than matter; men are more "rational" and thus more valuable than women; or comparable fallacies). Nevertheless, it is equally problematic to disregard ontological differences in terms of gradation and scope: "agency" in cells is different from that in minerals; it has different characteristics in plants or animals, and so on. Ordering them all on one big "plateau" might risk not doing justice to *any* of these entities. It rather invites projections or anthropomorphisms (and the latter are, indeed, deliberately and strategically used by Bennett 2010 in order to undermine anthropo*centrism*), thus obscuring the particular responsibility that human beings have for the future of life on the planet.

Critical Theory, firmly based in sociology and social philosophy, is looking at the way our knowledge of the world is shaped by the forces driving social and political life; it can thus be a helpful ally when it comes to preventing confusions between different dimensions of reality, between distinctive aspects of our thought about reality, and between differing ways of dealing with the practical problems entailed by such a reality. Yet, as we have also seen, the perspectives opened up by New Materialisms point to important shortcomings of Critical Theory as it has been recently developed, in particular its potentially uncritical adoption of dualisms that tend to subordinate matter to spirit, the biological to the social or affectivity to rationality. How exactly to promote cross-fertilization between these two intellectual currents – taking account of, and not avoiding, the tensions of such a process – is the main question we aimed at opening up with this book.

The contributions

The contributions printed in this volume explore various fields in which approaches from Critical Theory and New Materialism can enrich one another: from philosophies of nature (Vetlesen, Gümplová) and life (Delitz, Bueno) to aesthetics (Taylor, Menke, Merten, Henning) and religion (Blencowe, Rosa); from problems of subjectivity and power (Saar, Menke, Anderson, Dolphijn) and from conceptions of agency and receptivity (Taylor, Blencowe, Henning, Rosa) to the question of what a theory might look like that allows for a new sensitivity toward nonhuman entities and dynamics (Taylor, Flatschart, Saar). Yet the reflections also indicate in many ways that the tensions or even rifts between those two currents still persist: for example, whereas some authors voice concern against the dualisms still at work in critical approaches (Delitz, Dolphijn, Gümplová), others hint at normative and conceptual ambivalences within the new materialist perspective (Blencowe, Flatschart).

Arne Johan Vetlesen and Petra Gümplová discuss in what ways the ontologically reduced (modern) conception of nature prevalent in current critical approaches seriously limits what this tradition has to say in matters of ecological concern and global distributive injustice. Vetlesen rereads the history of Critical Theory from Horkheimer and Adorno to Habermas, arguing that their concept of nature was unduly instrumental, so that emancipation was understood as something to be up *against* (the laws of) nature. While Adorno's and Horkheimer's approach reductively treats external nature as something that is rigid and primarily to be feared (thus glossing over a long human history of noninstrumental relationships toward animals and the environment), Habermas continued this line of thought by fusing knowledge of nature with the abstract *technologies* of modern industrial labor and science, likewise ignoring the "local knowledge" of nature in premodern cultures or noninstrumental encounters. In the end, Critical Theory is missing out on one of the most pressing concerns it has to answer to today. In a similar vein, Gümplová examines the way in which nature is conceived in current legal notions and practices of global justice, indicating that such a reductive understanding of nature is at play not only in (critical) thought but also in material *practices*. She shows how political concepts of sovereign territoriality are tied to a practice of domination over nature that conceives of the latter as a resource to be extracted and exploited (from the airspace to the "depth underground"). As a consequence, natural resources not only legitimately satisfy human needs but also sustain unjust rules. Against this, Gümplová argues for a renewed "language of justice" that includes indigenous peoples and rules out violent dispossessions. Insofar as it makes human rights the key standard of a just exercise of resource rights, it should make governments accountable to environmental interests of humankind.

Charles Taylor and Hartmut Rosa both ask how such an instrumental and objectifying stance toward the world could be overcome in theoretical terms. In a sweeping move reminiscent of Heidegger, Taylor questions two core values that are held dear by modern-day rationalists: agency (as opposed to passivity) and rationality (as opposed to feeling). According to him, a criticism of alienation that

only focuses on a loss of agency (as one can see at play, e.g., in both Lockean liberal and Marxist approaches) blinds us to another loss prevalent in modernity: the loss of our capacity to experience, of receptivity, of "patiency" (see Henning 2020b). This also connects to the importance of feeling, which goes amiss if a calculating rationality becomes the prime value. Taylor sides with Rosa in stressing this *second* kind or dimension of alienation: a suffering from a world that has become silent. The objective for Critical Theory then is to get "beyond agency", toward an ethical stance that is more open and in attunement, or at least in responsive exchange, with the world (also discussed by Blencowe, see later). Resorting to Baudelaire and T.S. Eliot, Taylor goes on to demonstrate the power of poetry to transform our experiences in that manner, thus indicating that Critical Theory could draw from the field of aesthetics in order to "render our lived experience meaningful again". This is a path similar to the one taken by Rosa in his chapter, yet referring not to the realm of aesthetics but to existential or religious experience. Rosa (2019) has written a "sociology of world relations" in which he systematically explores how subjects are embedded in a world full of relations, where the alternative is between a world that "speaks to us" in vital dimensions, such as nature, art, history or religion, and one that remains utterly silent. In this text, he argues that the kindred approach of Bruno Latour tackles similar issues: in particular, Rosa is interested in the way Latour deals with the problem of how we can overcome the reduced ontology of "the Moderns" (which, according to Latour, divides the world into subjects and objects) and get to a richer understanding of the beings around us. It is first of all Latour's take on religion that sparks Rosa's interest, for it is here where the French thinker comes closest to a resonance theory, given that Latour redescribes religion as an "appeal" that demands a "response". With this in mind, Rosa maintains that Latour's relational ontology (where "the type of relation gives rise to the subject and the object, to values, experiences and even truths") may help us to "overcome the ecological, economic and moral crisis of our current modernity".

Martin Saar, Kerstin Andermann and Christoph Menke adopt a different strategy in order to tackle the shortcomings of contemporary Critical Theory. Instead of attempting to build an alternative to the framework of modern rationalism, they rather elaborate on the internal tensions of Enlightenment itself. In turning to Spinoza, Saar and Andermann show that not all of Enlightenment was so problematic in the end, once we turn to the radical naturalist tradition. Whereas Saar searches for new concepts of power and sociality informed by Spinoza and recent Spinoza-scholarship, Andermann aims to reform our thinking of individuality in terms of "transindividuality". Saar follows Spinoza in rethinking power not as necessarily located in the individual but as "forces joining and combining themselves" that can lead to creation and not only destruction (as the Hobbesian paradigm had it). In order to use that for an alternative theory of politics, the meaning of "affects" and sociality (or "affective relationality") is revised. Even if "in itself it may not be critical", this has bearings for Critical Theory because it "invites transformation" and imagines "other possibilities" from a perspective of "life itself, and not as a question of norms or laws". Likewise, Andermann asks for the "ontological

foundations of the social field" from a neo-Spinozist perspective informed by Etienne Balibar and Deleuze, claiming that in Spinoza's theory of affect "individuality is already transindividuality".

Menke addresses the inner tensions of Enlightenment from an aesthetic perspective. For him, Enlightenment is the name of a paradoxical structure: the paradox of capacity. While capacity is meant to define the form of positive freedom (as autonomy), at the same time this fundamental belief is wrecked by the suspicion that capacities remain heterogeneous to subjectivity and therefore indissolubly connected to power. Menke claims that aesthetics is a privileged domain to explore this paradox, for it constitutes the field of a struggle over what capacities (that is to say, subjects) are. In the conflict between a conception of beauty as "value" or as "force", what is ultimately at stake is whether we are subjects *qua* instances of capacities or whether we are at once less and more than capable subjects. By working out the internal paradoxes of autonomous subjectivity as they play out in the aesthetic domain, one also encounters another conception of freedom – one which goes beyond autonomy.

Coming from a sociological background, Heike Delitz and Arthur Bueno interrogate the uses of the concept of "life" in social theory. Drawing from the French tradition of Bergsonianism, particularly as it is articulated in Canguilhem, Deleuze and Simondon, Delitz articulates a "critical vitalism" that attempts to go beyond the common distinctions of order versus disorder, normal versus pathological or life versus technology, and that would allow one to see more possibilities than the "technophobic, anthropocentric, and determinist theories of society" did. Arguing that "all societies are undetermined", Delitz's vitalism is directed against evolutionary theories and historical materialism "in the name of the unforeseeable, inventive character of (human) life". This tradition is also at stake in Bueno's chapter, in which new materialist or neo-vitalist ontologies of life are contrasted with critiques of social pathology stemming from contemporary Critical Theory. While both approaches resort to the concept of life in order to respond to the troubles posed by the crisis of modern life-forms, they do this in ways that are often deemed incompatible. For Bueno, a reconstruction of Georg Simmel's diagnosis of modern life provides an encompassing framework that allows one to retain the fruitful aspects of both perspectives while avoiding their theoretical insufficiencies and practical pitfalls. A critique of social pathologies can be thus articulated which accounts for both the normative dysfunctions of modern life-forms (and the problems of remaining in such a framework) and the longing for experiences of vitality that emerge in the context of the crisis (as well as for the perils of sticking one-sidedly to such a perspective).

Dealing even more head-on with new materialist approaches, Rick Dolphijn and Kai Merten draw conclusions for contemporary culture and theories of the self by using examples from dance theater, literature and science studies. Dolphijn shows how, after 1968, many critical theories, especially in the French context, aimed at reinventing theories of "the subject" that were more inclusive, equal and diverse than the conceptual hierarchies of the past allowed for. New Materialism is a reaction to this post-68 mode of critique in so far as criticisms based on analysis

of language were still driven by a "dualist desire to divide the world" (between language and materiality, male and female, etc.). New Materialism thus appears as a continuation and radicalization of 1968. Dolphijn endorses Rosi Braidotti's "monist explorations" to develop "non-dualist perspectives", where language is read not as representation but as an "active part" of the "matter-in-movement". With Brian Massumi, Dolphijn also describes the contemporary dance theater of Pina Bausch as an example for this relational ontology, where "movements create a dancing body". Subjectivity, in this respect, is ever-becoming.

Diving into the work of Karen Barad, Merten compares her thesis of an "onto-epistemological entanglement" with Hans Blumenberg's proposal of making the world legible. While reflection or representation seems to presuppose given objects that are "revealed", Barad's notion of diffractive reading acknowledges that the process of reading "creates differences in the represented phenomena". Yet Merten wants to extend that notion from cultural to natural phenomena, and to this effect uses Blumenberg's notion of "reading the genome" as one that is co-creative of the genome itself. Against Barad, however, Merten stresses that this process presupposes distance to, not entanglement with, nature. In describing scientific experiments, Barad presupposes experimenters who decide and control "the outcome of the experiment", yet Merten insists that "diffractive reading" needs "to posit an 'I' separate from the intra-active becoming of the world". When this subject is taken into consideration, the new method of critique can also push to "new spheres of ethical responsibility".

Finally, the chapters of Claire Blencowe, Christoph Henning and Elmar Flatschart seek to combine aspects from Critical Theory and New Materialism. Like Taylor and Rosa, Blencowe sees the downsides of a rationalist modernism focused on control and combines that with a firm criticism of neoliberal privatiza-tion that is in bed with racism. Her chapter inquires whether ecological attune-ment can provide a counter to today's barbarism. Blencowe looks at three feminist figures that articulate alternatives – the enchantress (with Jane Bennett), the witch (with Starhawk) and the intrusion of Gaia (with Isabelle Stengers) – asking how these figures speak to a popular politics that could lift our despair. Blencowe shows that whereas efforts to reenchant the world (like Bennett 2001) overlook that we *are* already enchanted, Starhawk's neopagan movement mainly appeals to white middle classes, and the "intrusion of Gaia" addresses people who already are in the sciences or the ecological movement. Hence all three figures, though impressive in their achievements, remain limited in scope and politically vague ("Chaos spiritualises, but all manner of spirits roam"). Like Dolphijn, Blencowe ends with a hopeful look at spiritualizing dance cultures (from Ska to Grime), reminding us that a countermovement should appeal to a broader public.

On the other hand, Critical Theory also needs "inspiration" from new materialist tendencies. To show that, Henning – like Taylor and Menke – delves into aesthetic realms, focusing more on the productive side of the arts than on "receptivity". When talking about their production process, artists and designers he interviewed reported an interaction with tools, materials, forms and ideas, thus revealing a certain "agency" of things. These practical experiences flesh out ideas put forward

by Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour in theory. New materialist philosophies and interviews with artists and designers "resonate" and energize one another. This demonstrates empirically that some ideas of Latour and Bennett make sense for understanding aesthetic practices. But interpreting these experiences also revives critical theories, inasmuch as they rely on aesthetics as a field that allows for a critical distance toward market commodification. Finally, Flatschart ends the book with a detailed philosophical criticism of New Materialism, nevertheless hinting at ways how it could be undertaken with more bite when combined with empirical tools and a conceptual structure from Critical Theory. His criticism shows that leading new materialist authors are lacking clarity in no less than five fields (dualities, categories, nature, historicity and criticality): while "the focus on intra-action results in a difficulty to talk about nature in a *systematically objective* way", the monist ontology undermines distinctions and leaves categories vague. With the resulting "espousal of indeterminacy", New Materialism "offers no criteria for critique". Flatschart endorses Rosa's theory of acceleration as an alternative, arguing that a materiality that needs to be studied is *energy* – not simply as a "matter" that acts on itself but "as a social relation mediating the natural and social sides of modern materiality". Indeed, insights on the "agency" of things from this perspective that do not give up on a critical conceptual framework have been undertaken in recent critical studies of "things" like sugar, cotton, palm oil or phosphor (see Backhouse 2015; Beckert 2015; Anlauf 2019), indicating that this might be a promising way to combine New Materialism(s) and Critical Theory.

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Part 1

Nature in/of Critical Theory

2 Comprehending society's "Other"

Nature in Critical Theory

Arne Johan Vetlesen

Today, reports about the natural world being in peril are everywhere. How well-equipped is Critical Theory for this renewed interest in the other-than-human and the threats facing it? I will try to answer this question by concentrating on the most relevant works by Horkheimer, Adorno and Habermas. Notwithstanding the impressive scope of the critique of modernity-capitalist-style offered, in different versions, by the leading Frankfurt School philosophers, my argument will be that the approach taken to the natural world seriously limits the critique's validity in present-day circumstances.

Adorno and Horkheimer

One of the seminal insights for which Critical Theory is known is that the domination of nature and the domination of humans go hand in hand. The implication seems clear: you cannot end the latter domination without ending the former.

The classic articulation of the inseparability of the two forms of domination is the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, coauthored by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in 1943–4, during their American exile (see Vogel 1996; Cook 2011; Vetlesen 2015). They begin by quoting Francis Bacon to the effect that by overcoming superstition, the human mind will be able to hold sway over "disenchanted" nature, understood as nature denuded, rid of so-called occult forces of all kinds: that is to say, everything psychic and mental, everything to do with interiority and subjectivity, purpose and value. In a word, nature as disenchanted would equal matter in the Cartesian sense of *res extensa*, allowing for only quantitative (external, observable) properties such as size and weight and no qualitative ones such as would amount to agency. Replacing the superstition characteristic of pre-modern "primitive" cultures, knowledge of the truly scientific kind recognizes no obstacles, respecting only the limits it sets for itself. Knowledge is seen as inseparable from power in the strong sense of *being* power; its essence is technology. In a word: "What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1979 [1947]: 4).

The disenchantment of the world that Bacon and Descartes helped establish as distinctive of the modern, scientific worldview is inseparable from the extirpation of animism. Animism – the acted-upon perception among "primitive" peoples

that animals and other forms of nonhuman creatures are persons and must be treated as such, not least in hunting – was seen by the Enlightenment as part and parcel of myth. What needs to be rooted out is its guiding principle, namely anthropomorphism: the projection of the human (subjective) onto nature, nourishing the illusion that animals are in crucial respects like us, that they too can have feelings, pursue goals and so on. Hopefully, tabooing anthropomorphism would ensure that, as far as nature – meaning nature undifferentiated, in its totality – is concerned, what possesses real, objective and undeniable existence is what (and only what) can be measured, counted and calculated. Hence outer nature, everything nonhuman, was to be perceived and treated as exhaustively describable in numbers, facilitating the calculability of the world, without remainder.

Crucially, what this by the same token facilitates, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is a totalitarian tendency, inseparable from the Enlightenment from the very start and later made into the working principle of modern capitalist society: equivalence as rendered by numbers made the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities and thereby stripping it of everything that would mark particularity or uniqueness. In this way, that which does not reduce to numbers becomes illusion: what fails to qualify as knowable – as an object fit for scientific description – fails to qualify as real. But more than the status of nature is at stake here:

> Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with the alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them insofar as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them. In this way their potentiality is turned to his own ends. In the metamorphosis the nature of things, as a substratum of domination, is revealed as always the same. This identity constitutes the unity of nature.
>
> (ibid.: 9)

The deeper aim of shrugging off the last remnants of superstition, indeed the promise of the Enlightenment, was to free man from fear: once the mythical worldview was given up, men would cease to fear nature. Knowledge of the scientific kind and as acted upon in novel technologies would see to it that nothing would remain hidden, in the dark, beyond the reach of knowledge-based observation, intervention and control: "Man imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown" (ibid.: 16). Where the omnipresent forces of nature had once prevailed, compelling humans to subjugate themselves, as must the inferior party, and as such – as utterly dependent on something outside themselves – doomed to an existence of fear, so transparency and control would at long last enable its overcoming. However, in this very endeavor, Enlightenment

> compounds the animate with the inanimate just as myth compounds the inanimate with the animate. Enlightenment is mythic fear turned radical. The pure

immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is no more than a so to speak universal taboo. Nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere idea of outsideness is the very source of fear.

(ibid.: 16)

What we begin to realize here is how the dialectic unleashed by the Enlightenment comes back to haunt the modern subject: believing to free themselves from their subjection to nature, modern humans become increasingly entangled in the subjection of nature to the self, namely the peculiarly modern self, understood as an artifact brought about by Western-style civilization and unknown in premodern times. The dialectic at work is that between outer and inner nature; the emancipation celebrated by the moderns is forever tainted by the unfreedom – fixity, rigidity, ultimately death – of the nature sought to be overcome, be it outside or inside of the subject. The obsession with self-preservation comes at the price of denial, of renunciation of every trait, every aspect of living life, within or without, that threatens to defy the requirements of order over chaos, predictability over spontaneity, reason over affect. This explains why Horkheimer and Adorno give such prominence to the *Odyssey*, proclaiming Homer's poem "the basic text of European civilization" (ibid.: 46).

The protagonist in Homer's poem is an anticipation of things to come: namely, the prototype of the bourgeois individual. Odysseus struggles to become a full-fledged, self-positing autonomous subject. This struggle, Horkheimer and Adorno contend, has throughout Western history been linked to sacrifice, renunciation and repression – not only of nature, or of others, but of the self as well. "The estrangement from nature that Odysseus brings about is realized in the process of the abandonment to nature he contends with in each adventure" (ibid.: 48). By imitating nature Odysseus learns to adapt to it, yet in imitating nature's regularities and rigidity he himself ends up rigid. Only through repression of instincts and continual sacrifice – what Horkheimer and Adorno consider "a denial of nature in man for the sake of domination over non-human nature and over other men" (ibid.: 54) – may Odysseus survive. Autonomy can only be attained at the price of a suppression of man's own inner nature (Horkheimer and Adorno make no distinction between male and female persons at this stage); what he demands from himself, having internalized the demands imposed by his society, is that he suppress his immediate feelings and needs, since spontaneity would only betray him and allow others the upper hand in a merciless and competition-driven social world where every man must learn to fend for himself – that is, the reality principle.

On this analysis, then, "the history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice, the history of renunciation". But, significantly, "everyone who practices renunciation gives away more of his life than is given back to him: and more than the life that he vindicates" (ibid.: 55). To make a long history short, what transpires through the history of Western civilization is that as soon as and to the extent that man suppresses his awareness that he is himself nature, and so too all his instinctual, affectual and other traits and capacities betraying as much, then all the ends for which he keeps himself alive – not least the freedom aspired

to in the form of individual autonomy, independence from nature and from everything associated with heteronomy (Kant) – become null and void. Horkheimer and Adorno term this "the prehistory of subjectivity", and the irony should not escape us. For, to repeat, what they argue is that man's domination over himself no less than over outer nature, which grounds his selfhood (recall Odysseus), brings about the destruction of the subject in whose service it is undertaken. The suppression of nature *in* the subject *by* the subject amounts to the annihilation of life itself.

So much for the narrative set out in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. We now need to situate its analysis within the tradition with which its authors associate themselves, namely Western Marxism. The attempt to control outer nature that the Frankfurt philosophers saw as inseparable from Enlightenment thinking and from modernity is also looked upon as inseparable from capitalism as an economic system: it crucially and necessarily entails the domination of "man over man" in the fashion of one social class over another. We have seen how the compulsion to rationally control the forces of outer nature is bought at the price of the repression of the inner nature of the human individual. If Marx is the precursor in the modern epoch of the first tendency, Freud is that of the second.

My question is: what do Horkheimer and Adorno have in mind when speaking about the "revolt of nature"?

The answer is the revenge of *human* nature. That is to say, the more mercilessly humans, by way of science and technology, exploit and subjugate outer nature, the more is human nature alienated in the process. The exploitation of outer nature is criticized to the extent that it leads to the latter consequence.

In giving pride of place to this aspect, something crucial is left out of the picture: the consequences of careless intervention into the biosphere. Once the importance of this second form of revenge of nature is stated, its absence in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is conspicuous. No systematic attention is given to the destruction of nonhuman nature as a topic and a source of concern in its own right. In this sense, there is a nature deficit in the early version of Critical Theory for which the *Dialectic* remains the classic statement.

There is something odd about the way in which the attempt to control nature by imitating it, as dramatically brought out in the depiction of how Odysseus tries to deal with the sirens, has the effect of portraying nature as "rigid" and hence as constraining, as everything but spontaneous in its being different from us humans. In his lectures leading up to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno observes how "Marx speaks with the scientist's passion of the inexorable laws of nature" (Adorno 2006: 117f.). In doing so, he is all focused on how "the law of capitalist accumulation", by way of mystification, is metamorphosed by economists into a pretended "law of Nature" (Marx), thereby introducing into the human sphere of freedom the sort of ontology – that of inexorable laws – that applies to (nonhuman) nature, echoing Kant's metaphysical two-world thesis: autonomy versus heteronomy; the freedom that holds for humans and the determinism that is attributed to the entire (nonhuman) natural world. In short, two realms of reality are pitted against each other as mutually exclusive, as far as properties (especially capacities of agency)

are concerned, erecting an ontological abyss between humans and the rest. It is as if the truth of the ontology ascribed to the latter – in toto at that, as if nature was a perfectly homogeneous domain, even if comprising the entire range from the organic to the inorganic – is so obvious as to render questioning moot. At best, there is an ambiguity in the passages quoted from Adorno here, in that it never becomes quite clear whether the rigidity attributed to natural phenomena is part of "first nature" – and so the way nature presumably intrinsically "is" – or whether the lawlikeness that capitalist accumulation assumes and the rigidity the bourgeois subject imitates from nature are themselves a product of the impact by humans on that nature, per force extinguishing its spontaneity as a preparatory step to human subjects' subsequent ridding themselves of it.

To my mind there is something reductive about this whole approach. Take the often-cited thesis that "Enlightenment is mythic fear turned radical" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1979 [1947]: 16). While criticizing the taboo against anthropomorphism, Horkheimer and Adorno remain loyal to the no less deeply entrenched modern taboo against acknowledging how practitioners of "mythic" worldviews engage in various forms of non-fear-driven interaction with members of what used to be an exceedingly rich nonhuman natural world. No interest is taken in how, say, human–animal relationships form patterns of mutual dependence, adjustment and exchange, as in the give and take of hunting, where the prey are respected as persons and perceived, humbly, as a gift insofar as animals give themselves up to humans who, being the inferior party, so utterly depend on their doing so (see Berkes 2008); in how interspecies relationships are borne by love and affection as arising between particular animals and particular human individuals sharing the same location (habitat); or in humans' – especially children's – curiosity and open-mindedness toward everything nonhuman, as a source of endless fascination precisely on account of the otherness thus encountered as part and parcel of a shared world, facilitating a deep bonding between humans and (particular) animals, whereby the attainment of a sense of self-identity occurs in a much more differentiated "total environment" than one restrictively human-populated: even birds, say, can be significant others (see Shepard 1982).

To be sure, the anthropological studies that document such a rich interspecies world of all sorts of "others" for humans to relate to and engage with are more numerous today than when Horkheimer and Adorno wrote the *Dialectic* (see, e.g., Ingold 2001; Descola 2013; Kohn 2013; Vetlesen 2019). The point is that to the extent that a stance of respect and awe toward animals is acknowledged at all in Horkheimer and Adorno's account of cultures exemplifying "mythical" worldviews – say, in hunters' attitudes to their game – it is so not as a genuine and original stance but as one (cunningly, strategically) adopted ad hoc, more feigned than real, namely as always originating from, and never fully escaping, fear. Though professing to be constantly wary of projection and its workings, Horkheimer and Adorno seem blind to their own projection of fear onto every historical instance of humans' relationship to nature. In holding fear and repression not only to be an essential by-product of the transition from mythical to modern worldviews but also to have dictated humans' interaction with nature even in the earliest and

most "primitive" societies, they commit the fallacy of projecting from the present state – as we saw, one in which humans have been removed from nature instead of being immersed in it as members of the one earthly world coinhabited by a multitude of other species – to the very earliest one, thereby reducing history to a mere repetition of the same. That the relationship between humans and our natural "others" once was, and indeed can be, radically different from now is not really given a hearing; rather the very notion is seen throughout as an illusion – myth is already Enlightenment, Enlightenment relapses to myth. At all times, fear is the basis. This does injustice to both, myth and Enlightenment.

Habermas

I turn now to the case of Jürgen Habermas. Of course, his is an enormous oeuvre. Even so, nature is less of a key topic in Habermas than one would have expected. Moreover, on my reading it is one that he has never changed his mind about since his early major statement, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, published in 1968.

In that work, his international breakthrough, Habermas' ambition is to offer a way forward for a Critical Theory able to identify the sources of an "emancipatory interest" in contemporary capitalist society. The central thesis is that critique of society must take the form of critique of knowledge, whereby forms of knowledge (inquiry) correspond to three distinct cognitive interests: that of technical control, of understanding and of emancipation, located in the natural, hermeneutic and social sciences, respectively.

Crucial to Habermas' argument is Marx' emphasis on labor as the basis for humans' relationship with nature. Labor is a

> condition of human existence that is independent of all forms of society, a perpetual necessity of nature in order to mediate the material exchange between man and nature, in other words, human life. . . . Labour is above all a process in which man through his own action mediates, regulates, and controls his material exchange with nature. He confronts the substance of nature itself as a natural power.
>
> (Marx, *Capital*, quoted in Habermas 1972: 27f.)

For Habermas, the "resurrection of nature" (Marx) cannot be logically conceived from within (Marxist, historical) materialism, "no matter how much the speculative minds of Benjamin, Bloch, Marcuse, and Adorno find themselves attracted by this heritage of mysticism" (Habermas 1972: 33). (Note that mysticism is Habermas' rather denigrating term of choice here.) Habermas insists that, understood as the correlate of social labor, "objectified nature retains both *independence* and *externality* in relation to the subject that controls it". Nature's independence manifests itself in "our ability to learn to master natural processes only to the extent that we subject ourselves to them". The language of natural "laws" that we must "obey" articulates this elementary experience. The upshot is

that "no matter how far our power of technical control over nature is extended, nature retains a substantial core that does not reveal itself to us" (ibid.: 33).

Marx retained a notion of what Habermas calls "something like a nature in itself", existing prior to the activities of mankind. Yet Habermas warns against exaggerating – that is, misconstruing – this independence, which can be called ontological. For "while epistemologically we must presuppose nature as existing in itself, we ourselves have access to nature only within the historical dimension disclosed by the labour processes" (Habermas 1972: 34). "Nature in itself" is therefore an abstraction, contends Habermas, and as such "a requisite of our thought, much like Kant's 'thing-in-itself'" (ibid.). In the materialist as opposed to Kantian idealist conception Habermas takes over from Marx, labor has the function of synthesis, ensuring its coming about as historical fact. This is so because what Habermas designates the behavioral system of instrumental action – that is, labor in Marx – is seen as constituting "the invariant relation of the species to its natural environment", invariant and nonoptional in the materialist quasi-Kantian sense of a "quasi-transcendental condition": without labor, no nature as experienced by humans. The implication is that "with transcendental necessity", the conditions of instrumental action "bind our knowledge of nature to the interest of possible technical control over natural processes". Conforming, per analogy, to the Kantian approach, this makes for a scheme that is "equally binding on all subjects that keep alive through labour". And yet there is also something fundamentally un-Kantian about the way Habermas, taking his cues from Marx' materialism, conceives of this. What is deemed necessary in a transcendental sense – *Alternativlosigkeit* in Habermasian parlance – at the same time allows for the *altering* force of human (societal) history: "[B]oth nature, which has been reshaped and civilized in labour processes, and the laboring subjects themselves alter in relation to the development of the productive forces" (ibid.: 36).

Coming at Habermas' thesis from, say, a historically informed social science such as anthropology, the constitutive role he gives to labor must appear nothing short of baffling. For a start, it flies flatly in the face of a work such as Marshall Sahlins' modern classic *Stone Age Economics* (1972). So we should ask: is labor in the sense intended by Habermas equiprimordial with humans' epistemic as well as practical stance toward nature, in the strong sense of helping constitute both, humans as well as the nature they relate to? Is the thesis that "only in its process of production does the species first posit itself as a social subject" (ibid.: 39) open to being disproved? Or, is the thesis true by definitional (conceptual) fiat? And what about the follow-up thesis: "The identity of consciousness, which Kant understood as the unity of transcendental consciousness, is identity *achieved through labour*" (ibid.: 40; emphasis as in original)? Since it is difficult to imagine a society whose human members have achieved no identity of consciousness, the corollary that follows is that all (such) societies must be engaged in labor in Habermas' sense. Is this borne out by the historical facts? What about hunters and gatherers? What about different kinds of nomads, predating the advent of agriculture in human history? Do they, for lack of organized labor in the sense intended, lack the conditions for their individual members' achieving the identity

of consciousness? What about the cultures – say, animist or panvitalist ones, these being by far the most common up till modernity (see Jonas 2001 [1966]: 7) – in which the identity formation of humans to a large extent depends on and involves relationships with so many nonhuman others? These are relationships, whose essence is *not* expressed in "the behavioural system of instrumental action", and so in objectifying nonhuman nature in toto with respect to predicting, calculating and controlling it as so many means for human ends, but is expressed instead in that of the acted-upon perceived reciprocity between (very different manifestations of) persons (see Descola 2013).

It is true that Habermas voices important criticisms of Marx, taking him to task for "reducing the process of reflection to the level of instrumental action", thereby "eliminating reflection as such as a motive force of history" (Habermas 1972: 44). Though important, this does not address the questions raised. What Habermas is concerned about is something else entirely: that the natural sciences, by serving as a model for the social sciences, become "the power of technical control" over social processes, thus stifling humans' potential for emancipation – emancipation achieved through the medium of self-reflection inaugurated by Kant and Fichte and put on a proper dialogical footing in Freud's psychoanalysis.

Habermas' discussion of Dilthey helps us see more clearly what is at stake. As noted, we "mark out nature from the viewpoint of how we gain control of it as a world of phenomena subject to general laws". But as Dilthey observed, this comes at the condition of excluding the experience of the subject. Habermas comments:

> The intersubjectivity of the frame of reference within which we objectivate nature as something to be controlled according to laws is bought at the cost of neutralizing broadly complex, biographically determined and historically shaped sensibility. That is, the entire spectrum of prescientific experiences in daily life is excluded. But the knowing subject is not totally eliminated. Objectified nature is rather the correlate of an ego that intervenes in reality through instrumental action.
>
> (ibid.: 142)

What interests Habermas is that the position of the subject in the cultural sciences or humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) is wholly different: it is distinguished by "unrestricted experience" in granting the experiencing subject its "free access to reality", not being limited to the standardized experimental conditions of observation demanded in carrying out experiments in the natural sciences. In the latter case, the subject-cum-researcher is perfectly exchangeable: the *anonymity* of the individual scholar corresponds to the *repeatability* of the observations made, the insignificance of their particular time and place, and the *replicability* of the experiment – all of which help secure the validity (the redeeming of the truth-claim) of the science being done, the reliability of its results in one case after another.

The passage where Habermas, following Dilthey, acknowledges that the requirements for doing natural science, for engaging cognitively with the natural world and all the phenomena it contains, are "bought at the cost of neutralizing . . .

sensibility" is worth dwelling upon. It gives Habermas a chance to elaborate the implications of the "cost" he refers to. But he refrains from doing so. Instead he notes – as were it a simple matter of fact – that there is an either/or contrast between the subject epistemically engaged with the cultural world (that of human-made symbols, of social interaction and communication) and the subject epistemically engaged with the natural world: the former is given free access to reality (meaning the appropriate object domain), is free to exhibit his or her subjectivity, and hence is free to be a distinct somebody; the latter enjoys no such freedom but must neutralize his or her subjectivity in its entirety, performing the standardized assigned role as a nobody and carrying out, say, the lab experiment as anybody would. Without saying so, Habermas here echoes Plato's *episteme*, in that knowledge of nature qualifies as scientific by abstracting from role-bound, contextual and spatiotemporal particularities, in stark contrast to the local knowledge inseparable from time and place characteristic of how indigenous peoples know "their" forest (not forests in general) precisely by being immersed in it and by approaching it, always in some specific role and capacity, as consisting of so many particular animals and so forth. In its experience-based, firsthand, not merely cognitive but all-senses involving, bodily tuning-in to the particularities encountered *here* and *now*, local knowledge of this sort exemplifies Aristotelian *aisthesis* rather than Plato's *episteme*: a knowledge not attained through abstraction from everything concrete and particular but through maximal attentiveness to it.

Returning to Habermas, "instructions that I learn from reality if and insofar as I intervene in it through operations" are what guides truly scientific knowledge; "my experiences have transcendental necessity only under the factual condition of successes or failures of possible instrumental actions" (ibid.: 129). Habermas observes that "experimentally produced phenomena are based on the suppression of all of life experience in favour of a general effect", adding that "this experience abstracts from all connections with life history", and does so as part of "the behavioural system of instrumental action" (ibid.: 162). Not only does he insist on this being how it is; he submits that it has to be so out of "transcendental necessity", and he refers to the "costs" without lamenting them *as costs* for a single moment. Why? And if something is lost here, as the word "cost" suggests, what is it?

We are told that in the hermeneutic sciences, "the relation of observing subject and *object* [that holds for the natural sciences] is replaced by that of participant subject and *partner*" (ibid.: 180f; emphasis as in original). Noting that the "interpreter cannot abstractly free himself from his hermeneutic point of departure", Habermas fails to raise the question whether the "observing subject" inquiring into so many "objects" in outer nature can really do so, to allude to Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published in 1962 but not mentioned in Habermas' book.

The bottom line is this. Despite the significant revisions that his framework for a Critical Theory has undergone – from his first major statement *Knowledge and Human Interests* to, say, his opus magnum *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984/1987) – the technical cognitive interest continues to define the conditions for knowledge in what Habermas used to call the empirical-analytic sciences. Let

us be clear about what this interest amounts to: mastery and "technical control over objectified processes" (Habermas 1972: 309) attained and secured through a combination of laboratory experiments and carefully executed interventions (Bacon) and invoking general laws seen at work in physical processes and allowing for prediction in the form of linear causality (if X, then Y, so that every time X, Y will necessarily follow). Indeed, his position here has proved to be one of the constants in Habermas' vast oeuvre: as long as it operates within its proper domain of knowledge and intervention, that is, external nature, the technical cognitive interest is to this day regarded by Habermas as *the* appropriate stance:

> While we can indeed adopt a performative attitude to external nature, enter into communicative relations with it, have aesthetic experience and feelings analogous to morality with respect to it, there is for *this* domain of reality only one *theoretically fruitful attitude*, namely the objectivating attitude of the natural-scientific, experimental observer.
>
> (ibid.: 243f.)

In his *Principles of Philosophy*, written in 1644, Descartes assured his readers:

> There exist no occult forces in stones and plants. There are no amazing sympathies and antipathies, in fact there exists nothing in the whole world of nature which cannot be explained by purely corporeal causes totally devoid of mind and thought.
>
> (Descartes 1978 [1644]: para. 187)

Even though Habermas articulates his position in a different terminology than Descartes, one is hard-pressed to find substantive ontological, epistemological and methodological differences between them. Revealingly, in the catalog of "formal world concepts" with corresponding attitudes, validity claims and discourses that Habermas offers from 1981 onward, there are no proper categories for, let alone accounts of, such natural beings as trees, birds and rivers. In fact, there is no "natural world" in Habermas' typology, nothing to do analytic justice to the peculiarity of the grown as distinct from the made or the animate as distinct from the inanimate; there is only an "objective world" that by default comprises everything that does not fit into either the social world or the subjective one. Unsurprisingly, the anthropocentricity of this whole framework is championed in his later discourse ethics (Habermas 1990, 1993). Nowhere does Habermas address, or show any affinity with those addressing, what Paul Shepard in *Nature and Madness* considers the pivotal question of our time: "Why do men persist in destroying their habitat?" (Shepard 1982: 1).

Integrating nature into Critical Theory

I began with crediting Critical Theory for the insight that the domination of nature and the domination of humans go hand in hand. On closer scrutiny, however – and this goes for both generations considered here (and including Axel Honneth as a third one would make no difference) – it is the way in which the mastery of nature,

seen as emblematic of capitalist modernity, is playing itself out as the repression of *humans' "inner" nature* that is the target of their critique, not the destruction of nonhuman nature. The outward-directed destruction is left unexplored, largely so in Horkheimer and Adorno, wholly so in Habermas – which is ironic since it has gotten much worse in Habermas' lifetime than in that of his predecessors. It is as if the man-made destruction of nature fades from view once it has helped launch the dynamics peculiar to inward-directed, human-centered repression and the pathologies that go with it, manifesting themselves within the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld in the form of anomie and loss of freedom and meaning.

Today, more clearly than ever before, we are confronted with the two-dimensionality of the exploitation that is the *modus operandi* of capitalism: for capital to be able to exploit labor, labor must be able to exploit nature in ways conducive to the imperatives of growth and profit. Short of an intact nature that provides the substrate at which the capital/labor constellation directs its effort to turn everything into commodities, the material foundation on which capitalism relies, and indeed utterly depends, would fall away. Whereas labor as "human capital" may be over-used, resulting in burnout among the human individuals affected, along class divisions at that, natural capital may be – today indeed is – overexploited so as to result in overshoot within the ecosystems affected, causing the disappearance of habitat, the erosion of the soil, the toxification of the seas, the pollution of the air, the mass extinction of species and the reduction of biodiversity, all of which are now exacerbated by global warming. To quote the economist Herman Daly (2007: 252), in

> yesterday's empty world man-made capital and labour were limiting, in today's full world natural capital with its flow of natural resources is limiting: the fish catch is no longer limited by the number of fishing boats, but by the remaining populations of fish in the sea.

That the limiting factor would change from man-made to natural capital is not something for which Marx can be blamed for not predicting as the double catastrophe – that of strongly interconnected human burnout and natural overshoot – that capitalism's worldwide hegemony leads to. But a Critical Theory that hopes to be relevant in our time needs to recognize this all-too-real catastrophe as nothing less than its point of departure: it needs to stop taking nature, in its role as the material sine qua non of capitalist exploitation, for granted. Human society cannot do without nature but depends on it, on nature being intact. A viable Critical Theory cannot leave the importance of this fact to economics or to the natural sciences but needs to integrate it into its theoretical framework and its practical aims from the very beginning.

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3 Sovereign territory and the domination over nature

Petra Gümplová

Sovereignty, nature and critical theory

The process of the division of the earth's land into sovereign territorial units is almost complete. There is no *terra nullius* over which a sovereign jurisdiction would not be exercised or claimed, except perhaps the hostile and unexploitable Marie Byrd Land in Antarctica. Sovereign claims, moreover, are not limited to land territories and their surfaces. Within a given territory, sovereign jurisdiction extends above the surface of the earth into the airspace and to an unlimited depth underground. Coastal states have sovereign rights over their territorial waters. They also have exclusive rights to explore, exploit and manage natural resources in the waters, on the ocean floor and in the airspace in the so-called exclusive economic zones, which extend as far as 200 nautical miles (370 km) off the coast. The sum of these zones currently covers almost half of the surface of the world's oceans and includes nearly all living resources of the oceans as well as all known hydrocarbon reserves.

The system of sovereign territoriality is a deeply entrenched way of distributing rights over natural space and determining the forms of the human use of nature. Settled by international law, territorial sovereignty implies a range of powers and privileges, including the right to have ultimate control over the natural environment, to determine and enforce property rights, and to freely use the natural resources within its boundaries. Unlike the sovereign power over persons – which is with increasing effectiveness limited by human rights – the sovereign power over natural space and the raw materials occurring within it has been virtually unlimited. Nature and its resources are essentially considered the sovereign's property, and the key feature of the state practice resulting from this system of sovereign territorial rights is that the states use this natural property of theirs with a considerable degree of discretion and for their exclusive benefit.

Sovereignty and its scope have been linked to many pressing issues – the unsustainable exploitation of nature, the use of resources to perpetrate violence and sustain authoritarian rule, the depletion of ecosystems trapped within sovereign territories (rainforests, biodiversity), climate change and the continuous violation of indigenous rights. Unsurprisingly, sovereignty's tight hold over the natural environment has been subject to critique. Having recently discovered natural

resources and their relevance from the perspective of distributive justice, the philosophy of justice subjects the current system of sovereign rights over natural resources to moral inquiry. In line with its method of purely normative theorizing, however, the philosophy of justice has mostly focused on producing moral conceptions of natural resource justice or defending global distributive principles for an ideal world. Sovereignty has been either simply rejected as morally unjustifiable or judged against the backdrop of these purely moral principles – for example, egalitarian or other global distributive principles (Beitz 1979; Armstrong 2017) or the common ownership of the earth (Risse 2012).

These contemporary approaches do not offer a sufficiently robust critical account of the essence and the extent of the *domination over nature* that sovereignty facilitates and the injustice it perpetuates. This chapter attempts to outline how to correct this failure. Contrary to critiques that reject sovereignty over natural resources in light of purely moral rights or distributive principles, I focus on sovereignty in its own right and employ the method of critical genealogy – a critical history that traces sovereignty's origin, its structure and its scope in its various historical formations and identifies the organizing logic of the domination over natural space and the exploitation of resources upon which it is based.[1] The critical thesis I develop is that territorial sovereignty is organized around an exclusive property claim to natural space and a distinct political logic of the exploitation of nature for the sake of the sovereign's exclusive benefit and its ability to sustain the rule. It is this legal and political logic that has shaped modern sovereignty's scope and content and that has made natural resources within its reach inextricably connected to injustice in its most fundamental forms – violence, oppression, dispossession, exclusion and distributive inequality.

The focus on sovereignty as a legal-political regime that prevailed as an organizing system determining human uses of nature and its resources in the modern era represents, I argue, an innovative addition to a critical social theory that has so far offered only two accounts relevant for a critique of human domination and exploitation of nature – the *instrumentality* thesis and the *primitive accumulation* thesis.

The instrumentality thesis was formulated in the Frankfurt School's version of critical theory and reflected its central concern, namely the epistemological critique of science, scientism and technology (cf. Vetlesen in this volume). Adorno and Horkheimer's overarching critique of Enlightenment and instrumental reason, developed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, serves as its most paradigmatic example. Taking inspiration from Weber's account of the development of the modern rationalization process, especially his warning that modern rationalization leads to a "rational domination of the world" (Weber 1986: 153) and may lead to an imprisonment of the modern man in a dehumanized system of a new kind, Horkheimer and Adorno provided their own account of the genesis of modern reason. They located the origin of the crisis of modern rationality considerably further back in time to the process of the replacement of myth and magic with enlightened modes of thought. The key hallmark of enlightened modes of thought, they argued, is their positing of a new kind of relation to nature in which

the latter emerges as an instrumental resource for humans to be utilized in their interests. As the Enlightenment took hold through science and technology, nature had been disenchanted, stripped of its inherent powers and hidden qualities and turned into pure objectivity for man's manipulation and total domination (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979; Vogel 1996).

By providing a sweeping critique of Enlightenment and identifying the prevalence of instrumental rationality as its core and at the same time defining Enlightenment as the project of the domination of nature, Horkheimer and Adorno defined the contours of critical theory's take on the world of nature for the next generation of Frankfurt School thinkers. Marcuse (1968) and Habermas in their early work (1968) continued with epistemological analyses of science and technology and whether these are wholly determined by indifferent instrumental rationality or purposive-rational behavior. While these theorists each developed a distinct epistemological account of scientific modes of thought, with differences regarding sources, structures and consequences of such thought systems, they all implicitly assumed that science and technology together with the capitalist economic system – a system presumed to be most uniquely harmonized with such modes of thought – embody the essence of domination over nature as well as the domination of men over men, which the Frankfurt School has always claimed to be its main theme.

Within this Western European Marxist tradition, capitalism had never enjoyed a central place in the account of domination, both over nature and within society. This has changed recently as a result of capitalism's global spread and the perception of its major systemic crisis. An attempt to bring capitalism back to critical theory (Feldner and Vighi 2015; Fraser and Jaeggi 2018; Henning 2014) has meant a renewed interest in Marx's thought. Among the various of Marx's notions revitalized recently, one thesis has a particular relevance for the critique of domineering, exploitative and destructive human relations to nature – the primitive accumulation thesis. This thesis currently exerts a commanding influence within critical approaches to nature's domination.

Marx, as is well-known, addressed the process of primitive accumulation at the end of volume one of *Capital* to draw attention to capitalism's origin. Referring to processes of land enclosures in which peasants and subsistence farmers in 17th-century England were forcibly expelled from the land in order to turn it into private property, Marx sought to explain the process of capital accumulation and the emergence of a working class of wage-laborers who were divorced from their means of production and forced to sell their labor to capitalists. Within Marx's project of the critique of capitalism, the essentially violent and dispossessive process of primitive accumulation of land constitutes an initial phase of capital accumulation, later replaced by a more regularized process of reproduction of capitalist economic relations (Marx 1954: 667–85).

While this essential feature of Marx's stadial conception of capital accumulation was refuted (Nichols 2015), accounts of primitive accumulation have recently exploded in fields as diverse as critical geography (Harvey 1997), postcolonial studies (Guha 1998), indigenous studies (Coulthard 2014) and feminism

(Federici 2004). The now sizable discourse on primitive accumulation addresses issues of extraordinary salience for the understanding and the critique of the domination over nature, perhaps even more than the most ambitious reiterations of the instrumentality thesis that rely on an implausible wholesale refusal of science and technology on the one hand and on ahistorical and essentialist arguments about nature and its ontology on the other (Vogel 1996: 5). First, primitive accumulation critiques address the issue of violence. Whether it is a forceful removal of people from their land or other forms of seizure of resources, the enforcement of unjustly imposed private property rights (Harvey 2003) or ecologically harmful land enclosure for the purpose of the extraction of resources or agricultural development (Hall 2013), violence is rightfully categorized as one of the central problems of human relations to nature. Second, by exploring the instances of the usurpation of resources and their exploitative use by a few, the primitive accumulation accounts point to the problems of inequality, exclusion and distributive injustice concerning access to, the use of and benefiting from nature and its resources.

For all these plausible points of convergence, the primitive accumulation critiques remain inextricably bound to capitalism and thus fail to elucidate many other kinds of dominating forms of nature's enclosure and their breeding of violence, dispossession, exclusion and distributive inequality. Ultimately, what both theses tend to neglect is that the domination over nature, whether it is a purely instrumental exploitative use or a dispossessive and excluding enclosure of natural space and its resources, always presupposes technologies of law and political power and their ability to determine, enable and ultimately enforce a given system of exploitation. More importantly, if we accept that exploitation and its connection with violence, exclusion and political oppression are the most problematic features of the human use of nature that are to be accounted for critically, we must redirect our attention to their legal-political conditions of possibility. The focus here on the legal-political regime of sovereign territoriality aims to achieve just that.

Territorial sovereignty and its genealogy

The origin of modern territorial sovereignty and its being a distinct political technology of the appropriation of natural space and natural resources are to be located in the early period of European absolutism. As Benno Teschke (2002) showed convincingly, early modern absolutist sovereignty had the form of a dynastic rule and could be characterized as a "proprietary kingship" – centralized, personalized rule by a monarch, based on a wholly absent separation of public and private realms, and with a strong proprietary character reflected in the fact that the royal realm was regarded as the monarch's personal property. Proprietary kingship, Teschke argues, was driven by the imperative of wealth accumulation by kings who were compelled to maintain themselves at the top of the ruling class in the context of precapitalist property relations and no economic growth, and hence relied on forms of coercive political accumulation – the extraction of

the surplus and the accumulation of wealth and resources by means of political violence (Teschke 2002: 9).

The pressures of political accumulation of wealth inherent in the early modern form of absolutist sovereignty, which resulted from the struggles of monarchs to maintain and enhance their domestic power, account for domestic and foreign policies typical for this period. They also explain the fact that the dominant strategy of foreign policy was that of "geopolitical accumulation" of territories and resources (ibid.: 11). Geopolitical accumulation occurred through hereditary and succession wars, dynastic marriages, politically enforced mercantilist economic policies, territorial aggrandizement, and also colonization and empire-building. It is within this history of geopolitical accumulation by early modern sovereigns, especially in its colonial form, where the birth of territorial sovereignty and its exclusive and accumulative property claim to natural space and its resources is to be located.

Empires of the early colonial era could in fact be considered the most paradigmatic examples of how territorial sovereignty emerged as the main technology of nature's domination, for the sake of both resource accumulation and exploitation, and political domination over territory and its people. Consider, for example, Spain and its colonization of America. In the 15th and 16th centuries, Spain was a typical example of a dynastic proprietary sovereignty. It was an absolutist monarchy trying to maintain and consolidate power in the context of feudal economic relations and hence seeking to seize external valuable resources (gold, silk, spices) while attempting to exclude other European powers from accessing these resources. Its overseas expansion following Columbus' discovery of America in 1492 was sanctioned by the Pope, who granted Spanish kings rights to conquer and dominate infidel kingdoms. After a military campaign characterized by most historians in terms of unprecedented levels of cruelty, destruction of property and plunder of resources (Pagden 1995), Spain laid the foundation of an empire extending from Mexico to Peru.

After the conquest, the Spanish crown claimed absolute sovereignty over the new territorial domain. On the one hand, this sovereignty involved a broad set of jurisdictional powers over the inhabitants. With the native kingdoms extinguished, the surviving indigenous people became vassals of the crown with a very restricted set of rights and immunities. The Spanish embraced a system of extensive subjugation, both culturally via forceful Christianization and economically via systems of forced labor and tribute payments. On the other hand, Spanish sovereignty involved absolutist proprietary claims to the conquered realm and its natural resources. When silver was discovered in Peru and northern Mexico, a large extractive economy developed, based on a system of indigenous land expropriation, forced labor and slavery, and exploitative mercantilist economic policies, all aimed at maximizing the colony's economic utility to the mother country. The Spanish monarchy's treasury became heavily dependent on its overseas' extractive industry revenues and used them to sustain its absolutist rule and finance wars.

The colonial expansion of other European sovereigns in the 16th and 17th centuries was, for the most part, also achieved by means of war and conquest and with the use of sovereignty as the technology of domination and natural resources accumulation. Based on a similar papal grant to conquer infidel territory, the kingdom of Portugal took possession of Brazil in the mid-16th century after it turned out that coastal regions of its northeast were suited for sugarcane plantation. In the 17th century, the French imposed their sovereignty into several Caribbean islands, where they massacred local populations, imported slaves and established sugarcane plantations. Invoking rights of discovery and occupation, the British established crown colonies under the direct administration of the British government in North America, in the West Indies and later in Australia and New Zealand. Relying on a chartered Dutch East India Company, a state-like commercial enterprise endowed with sovereign prerogatives such as to wage war and impose a political rule, the Dutch extended their sovereignty through wars and conquests in the East Indies in order to establish full control over the production and trade of spices.

Since they were established for the sake of the exploitation and accumulation of natural resources for the exclusive benefit of absolutist sovereigns or sovereign-like private actors, the colonies from the Age of Discovery can be considered as paradigmatic pre-configurations of the scope and the logic of modern sovereignty's territorial grab of natural space and its resources. Territoriality, to be sure, cannot be understood in this period and context as a perfectly geographically fixed and functionally homogeneous political space over which a legally uniform rule was imposed. At the same time, territories – especially the conquered ones – had been considered as a property asset to which the sovereign could lay an exclusive claim and from which they could freely accumulate natural and in some cases human resources. From the very beginning, modern sovereignty had thus come to include both jurisdictional claims to rule over people and ownership claims to the possession of territory and its resources.

In the centuries-long history of European colonialism and intra-European wars of conquest, which lasted until after World War II and embraced almost all available and exploitable land on earth, territorial sovereignty has gradually become the dominant legal-political technology of the rule and an organizing principle of resource accumulation and exploitation. The nexus between sovereignty and the domination over natural space and the accumulation of natural resources had been especially prominent in colonial contexts, although it had not been limited to that. European monarchs went on to assert sovereign claims to foreign territories, invoking the language of trade, civilization and protection that had come to be preferred over the language of a holy war or discovery.

In the 19th century's scramble for Africa for example, treaties of cession became the preferred method of acquiring sovereignty over territories of the "backward" peoples of Africa. These treaties transferred sovereign rights over the territories concerned. Although European sovereigns were bound to observe certain limitations concerning their power over African nations and their people's property, they regularly exercised an unlimited sovereignty over the people there and their lands, resources and property – a practice that involved large-scale dispossession and

expropriation of native inhabitants and expropriation of their property, forceful removal from land deemed useful for construction, settlement, extraction or cash crop development, and discretionary allocation of land and extraction concessions to settlers and private companies (Linden 2016). The case of Congo Free State becoming a personal possession of King Leopold II of Belgium at the dawn of the 20th century can serve as an example of a full merger between sovereignty and private property of a whole territorial realm and its human and natural resources.

In the domestic context of the European states, sovereignty was gradually limited by the process of domestic constitutionalization (of separation of powers, civil liberties and political rights), and its coercive accumulation of wealth gave way to capitalist economic relations. These transformations notwithstanding, sovereignty remained organized around an exclusive proprietary claim to natural space within a territory and a distinct logic of the exploitation of nature and its resources for the sake of an exclusive and maximal benefit of individual agents, public or private, who rely on means of political coercion to protect and enforce their property claim. Historically, sovereign territoriality's enclosure of natural space arose from unjust acts (war, dispossession, inequitable treaties) and created a monistic political space with arbitrary boundaries usually cutting across preexisting human societies and ecosystems. Within this arbitrary political space, sovereigns continue to make claims to the supreme authority to make laws as well as to exploit natural resources for their exclusive benefit and to sustain their rule. The logic of this imposition is legal and political, not only economic or instrumental. As a result of territorial sovereignty, nature and its resources are no longer used primarily to satisfy basic human needs but have become a prominent material resource for the sustenance of an (unjust) rule.

Emancipation by constitutionalization?

Since the end of World War II, there has been an attempt to correct what had by then become a globally institutionalized system of colonial appropriation of territories, assets and natural resources by the European sovereigns. This has taken place in the context of a profound transformation of international relations and international law aimed at the establishment and reinforcement of safeguards for world peace, limiting state sovereignty and ending colonialism. This global transformation consisted in two major movements. On the one hand, the process of decolonization and postcolonial state formation involved the extension of equal rights of sovereignty to all states and peoples in a newly constituted international society. On the other hand, sovereignty was constitutionalized by the international legalization of human rights, the right to self-determination and territorial integrity, and the prohibition of outside intervention and the aggressive use of force.

Within this transformative process of constraining the scope of sovereign rights and prerogatives, both domestically and internationally, the norm of "permanent sovereignty over natural resources" (PSONR) was negotiated at the United Nations. This new norm of international law, adopted through a participatory, inclusive and deliberative process of international lawmaking, allocated both

jurisdictional and ownership rights over natural wealth and natural resources equally to all states and their people. Invoking the universal and inalienable equal right to collective self-determination of all peoples, the norm granted states and their people the right to freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources in accordance with their national interests and have full control over their use for the exclusive benefit of their citizens.

The introduction of PSONR represented one of the most consequential international reforms concerning ownership, control and the use of land and natural resources. It was aimed at the correction of the injustices of colonialism and its practice of territorial acquisition and ruthless exploitation of natural resources. By legalizing a set of prerogatives – most importantly, the right to legislate and adjudicate property rights and management rules over natural resources, to sell natural resources, to decide on terms of foreign investment and extraction contracts, and to nationalize foreign property (Schrijver 1997: 263) – PSONR provided legal instruments for the annulment of the private property rights or contractual terms imposed illegitimately or illegally by foreign states or companies. Beyond this function, PSONR also aimed at economically reinforcing the process of political self-determination of colonized peoples and at boosting the economic development of developing and newly independent countries. Protecting political control over the natural environment and its resources and securing economic benefits from the exploitation of natural resources for a country's people can be unambiguously identified as its moral core.

These emancipatory origins notwithstanding, too many countries have failed to use their natural endowments for national development and the well-being of their people. All too often, natural resources are used for the private benefits of ruling elites and oligarchs – to sustain repression, authoritarianism and military rule and even to wage unjust wars. Given an ongoing high demand for valuable natural resources, the sovereign right to territory and natural space and its resources can easily be turned into the ability to accumulate private wealth and maintain an unjust rule and perpetrate violence. Examples are countless: oil, diamonds and minerals are extracted and sold by corrupt and human rights–violating regimes in many parts of the world and the revenues are used for all kinds of unjust purposes, most frequently to sustain political repression (Wenar 2016).

The reason the new system failed to deliver more just uses of nature is that PSONR, very much like its imperial predecessor, is organized around the same exclusive property claim to natural space and a distinct political logic of the exploitation of nature and its resources for the sake of the sovereign's exclusive benefit and its ability to sustain the rule. PSONR created a system in which the sovereign is authorized to a permanent possession, a free use and a full exploitation of natural resources and all other components of the natural environment in a given territory. It grants its holders an extensive bundle of powers, privileges and immunities – to make contracts, to sell, to decide on the allocation of the revenue – and a full discretion in making decisions on what to do with its natural environment in accordance with their domestic law and national development strategy. Whatever the constitutionality of the regime or legitimacy of the state

power, governments acting on behalf of states have all the jurisdictional powers associated with PSONR. Moreover, PSONR reinforces a territorially monistic hold over natural space and also allows its progressive and dynamic expansion. Coastal states can expand their sovereignty claims further into oceans and claim their natural resources (fish, fossil fuels). As a result, all of the earth's territorial spaces and marine resources have gradually been swallowed by sovereign territoriality.

Due to its continuous proprietary claim to territory and its resources and the logic of the unlimited accumulation of resources for the exclusive benefit of the sovereign, which is inscribed at the heart of this regime, PSONR perpetuates the same kinds of injustice as its colonial predecessors. Illegal and violent acts still give rise to legal rights over resources. Nature and its resources are used by illegitimate and corrupt governments to sustain repression, authoritarianism and oligarchy or to fund terrorism. Large-scale exploitation of resources is pursued by governments attempting to boost economic development and growth, usually via inequitable foreign investment deals, which in most cases bring no benefits to society as a whole and harm or exclude marginalized and vulnerable groups. Due to its monistic claims over natural space within historically contingent borders, PSONR fails to recognize indigenous groups' legitimate claims of sovereignty over nature, as well as to accommodate other legitimate demands – for example, distributive claims of groups sharing a trans-boundary resource domain or humankind's claims to preserve biodiversity or other ecological services of resource domains located on some state's territory.

How can sovereignty's domination over nature be overcome? The vision of the emancipation from sovereignty's proprietary hold over natural space has to take two fundamental facts into consideration. The first fact, articulated persuasively by Risse, is that nature and its resources are indispensable for the satisfaction of basic human needs, which matter morally more than any non-anthropocentric intrinsic value that nature might have (Risse 2013: 113f.). This anthropocentric perspective cannot easily be dismissed given the persistence of pressing moral problems such as global poverty and radical inequality of access to basic natural resources and the benefits they provide as well as given the historic injustice of exploitation I described earlier. The second fact is that human habitation and the use of nature are subject to diverse demands and entitlements and clashing visions regarding how nature and its resources are to be used and turned into benefits. Normative considerations concerning nature thus must accept the possibility of legitimate, sustainable and distributively just uses of nature along with the challenge of attempting to specify principles for the resolution of conflicting demands over natural space and various uses of its resources.

The language of justice, I argue, is therefore uniquely positioned to become the standard of a moral and critical discourse about nature and the human use of it. It establishes who has what kinds of rights to nature and its resources and with what scope and limits, how the benefits and burdens flowing from natural resources ought to be allocated between individuals and groups, and how the conflicts over space and resources might be resolved. The emancipatory path, in other words,

has to be conceived in legal-political terms and it has to involve the redefinition and reform of sovereign territoriality and its ownership claim to natural space and its resources. This approach, coincidentally, could then contribute to a considerable legal turn emerging in critical theory and its common belief, articulated in the later work of Habermas (1996), that modern law and the legalization of rights are essential to justice in the context of ethical pluralism and the moral equality of individuals to pursue and discursively negotiate various versions of a good life (Scheuerman 2017).

One plausible option in accordance with this justice-based approach is to reconstruct PSONR along the lines of the process of the constitutionalization of sovereignty by international and domestic constitutional law, and norms of international distributive justice. Three fundamental limitations could be an outcome of such a reconstruction. *First*, illegal, violent or dispossessive origins of titles to territory and resources would not be recognized. Occupation, annexation and military coups could not give rise to resource rights, neither could contracts with illegitimate or corrupt governments, or land grabs that deprive a country's people of their means of subsistence. *Second*, specific conditions of legitimacy of the exercise of sovereign resource rights and principles of distributive justice relevant for the allocation of resource benefits ought to be specified. In this respect, making human rights the key standard of a just exercise of resource rights, both in the sense of the accountability and legitimacy of a government and in the sense of redistribution of benefits for the satisfaction of social and economic rights, appears as a plausible option (Gümplová 2017). *Last* but not least, the territorially monistic notion of sovereignty over natural resources must be disestablished and the extensive bundle of rights, powers and immunities associated with it unbundled. Minimally, states have to give up ownership claims to resources that are on indigenous territories or to resources whose exploitation conflicts with compelling environmental interests of humankind.

Note

1 Inspired by Foucault, critical genealogy is here understood as a method of pursuing a historical inquiry aimed at a critical engagement with the present and at developing the terms of a critical analysis designed to address a contemporary problem – here the failures of sovereignty over natural resources (Honneth 2009; Garland 2014).

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4 Resonance and Critical Theory

Charles Taylor

Critique, agency, and patiency

Everybody claims to be critical, but those who espouse the title "Critical Theory" are generally on the political Left. So it might help to look at the values that have generally animated the political Left in our (Western) culture.

I want to look at these in the light of three major issues, the response to which contributes to defining political (and moral) theories. In each of these crucial domains, the traditions of the political Left tend to fall with greater weight on one side rather than the other.

First, these traditions tend to find their moral sources principally in *agency*. This is true not only of the sources of socialism, for instance Rousseau and Marx, but also of those of liberalism, such as Locke and Mill. The principal good is, or at least presupposes, freedom. The free agent changes the world, finding the operative intentions in the self. Political action should take people from a phase where they are dominated by others, or in other ways their agency has been pre-empted, and takes us to a freedom which is effective self-action (*Selbsttätigkeit*).

Starting with the sources of liberalism, Locke tells us that we are being exploited, put upon, by élites who claim that certain ideas are innate, there in everyone, hence given by God, hence not to be challenged. This stance then morphs into a basic notion of Enlightenment: people too easily just accept things on authority, where we ought to work them out for ourselves.

At first, this recovery of agency is seen as called for by each individual and then hopefully achieved by the united action of these individuals. But with Rousseau, we get a new twist. We too easily fall into mutual dependence, in which masters and slaves deprave each other. Becoming full free agents requires a collective act where we put our whole relationship on a new footing; we see freedom, that is, real agency, as residing in the collective, properly ordered; the proper ordering is around the general will.[1]

Marx inherits this, but sees (thanks to Hegel and others) how totally inadequate Rousseau's account of human development is. We can't just stop anywhere, throw off the past and establish our society on the new, proper relationship. We evolve the conditions for this through history, which involves many transitions, which

humans pass through only barely sensing, if that, that these are the right steps to take. Finally the proletariat, created by capitalism, takes control of its condition *en pleine connaissance de cause*.

Before that crucial stage, agency is alienated, in a series of different ways, running from religious alienation right through to the alienation of labor under capitalism. But this is only one possible way of giving meaning to this crucial term "alienation"; one possible resonance of this term in our lives. The image in the Marxist tradition takes off from, say, the way I might alienate a property by selling it or giving it away; or it might be alienated from me by seizure, expropriation. The capitalist, operating in the system, alienates the worker's own labor in something like this sense.

But the word also suggests something very different to many people. Alienation may be a condition in which one cannot but feel alien in the world we live in, or this world cannot but feel alien to us. We are not "at home" in this world. "Alienation" here is not due to the expropriation of an activity; it rather consists in an unavoidable (in these circumstances) feature of experience. This world doesn't "speak to" us, or doesn't "answer" our attempts to find meaning. This experience can only be overcome by changing the circumstances (or perhaps my way of relating to these).

So, two rather different experiences are covered by this word. But one could, of course, find a place for both meanings in one's theory and argue, for example, that people suffer experiential alienation because they are undergoing expropriation of some crucial capacity or dimension of agency.

Such a combination theory may have some truth, but I want to raise this other type of alienation in order to explore the possibility that what is wrong with our world may not exclusively consist in the frustration or capture of *agency*. Undoubtedly, this is part of what goes wrong, and thus what Critical Theory has to diagnose. But I don't think it accounts for our whole wretched condition, even under advanced capitalism.[2]

So what gets left out? Before embarking on an attempt to answer this, I want to bring out two ways in which the wretched condition of contemporary society can be identified. One focuses on the ways in which such conditions can be imposed on some by others: for instance, the way in which the huge incomes of the upper 1% allow them to jigger the political system so as to ensure that inequalities grow. This involves denying people proper health care, decent housing and so forth. But this critique doesn't challenge the hypothesis, shared by many on the Left, that the life lived by the 1% can be perfectly satisfying and morally acceptable – if they only didn't use the power this confers to deprive others. Here the focus is on (mostly) distributive justice.

The second approach follows Rousseau and Marx (and also some religious critiques) in claiming that there is something wrong with élite life in these circumstances; quite apart from the harm to non-élites that these economic relations enable, the relations themselves are not properly human relations, not the highest human potential. Even highly successful fund managers are deprived of something.

With this distinction in the background, let me try to answer the question: what is wrong with our existing society beyond its injustice, and its capture of non-élite agency?

Well, for one, a really good society needs something more than equality and an absence of exploitation/deprivation of some by others. Of course, it most emphatically requires these. But it also needs a widespread capacity to see what human life means to others. Think of the way that some of our essential social institutions – of health care, education, social work – can fail in their purpose, even inflict harm, through a lack of attention or even comprehension of the real felt needs of those in their care. And this lack of comprehension may afflict even those who are administering the care. They can become ossified by bureaucratic rules and regulations that fail to help or even harm their supposed beneficiaries.

Or, they may simply be blinded by the culture of their profession to certain crucial needs. I remember when the movement began to offer palliative care to terminal patients for whom no cure could be found. It turned out that many doctors just didn't see the desire that many of their terminal patients had to have someone to talk to about their predicament. They were understandably focused on the goal of curing patients, and many were too concentrated on this to pick up the signals from the patients that couldn't any more be helped in this way. The palliative care movement tried to step in the breach.

From the positive side, think of what an inspiration it can be to come across some really imaginative and innovative hospital ward, or school, where this kind of openness and attention is present, and people can communicate their needs.

What both these experiences show is the importance of the ability/desire to reach beyond one's comfort zone, or zone of familiarity, to be open to lives and experiences outside these.

And of course, when we come to societies that are in fact multicultural, whatever the policies adopted, the need for this kind of openness is even more evident, particularly if our society contains strong reactions, and even movements that are militating for exclusion, and strong political movements are tempted to ride to power on such reactions, as we see to our horror today.

We are carried here beyond agency. My agency may be involved if I decide that I want to become more open, and set out to educate myself, but the actual condition of openness is a capacity to discern and be touched by the previously unfamiliar. It involves letting yourself be reached, be acted on, by the lives of others. Of course, to repeat, I can set out to receive training in becoming this kind of person, but the achieved state is in the domain of "passion" rather than action, a matter of *pathein*, rather than *prattein*.

How do people become capable or incapable of this kind of openness? Well, one way of increasing it could be to inaugurate programs to educate people in openness (here the activist speaks again). But in fact, how open people become in their lives is the result of a host of different life experiences. We are all born and brought up narrow to some degree – that is, we are all short of ideal openness, or even of the kind of openness we need to make a success of today's democratic

societies in the present conditions of global migration. But however brought up, we can all have experiences – meeting someone, responding to acts of exclusion and so on – that make us more open. And there can be negative experiences that push us in the other direction. Jihadis and Islamophobes are in a stance of objective collusion to maximize the negative ones.

But however we and our societies evolve in this regard, what we need here is not primarily a condition of *agency*; however we might act to enhance it, it is in the dimension of receptivity, the capacity to experience. It is a condition of what we might call *patiency*, except that the concept "patient" has already been invested with too many meanings to avoid misunderstandings.

But philosophically, we have to draw the conclusion that the over-focus of critical theories on the health and pathologies of agency is (a) unjustified and (b) may contribute to a blindness to the importance of "patiency".

Value and strong feelings

An important way in which the neglect of patiency can distort our Critical Theory lies in the bias of the agency focus toward rationality of a particular kind, the kind that opposes reason to the emotions. Here is another crucial issue area: the place of reasoning in moral/political thought.

How can our basic values or principles be grounded? Can they be shown to be valid by a mode of reasoning that need make no appeal to feeling? Or on the other side, are they purely based on a kind of feeling? We can recognize here the familiar opposition of Hume versus Kant. Or (what seems to me the correct view) do they originate in strongly felt intuitions (e.g., that human life as such must be respected), which can then be elaborated and defended by various modes of reasoning?

Now it is clear that the openness I described previously involves an education of feeling, an ability to experience sympathy, an ability to connect with others. As Paolo Costa (2017) explains in his interesting paper "Why Critical Theory Needs a Theory of the Emotions" (particularly the last section "A Transformational Concept of Reason"), our exploration and clearer definition of the "space of reasons" cannot proceed without careful and critical attention to how we feel about various predicaments that we encounter in our lives and those of others.[3]

This is a message that meets some resistance in the traditions of Critical Theory. In the original Marxist theory, this took the form of a self-distancing from moral reactions. In defining what socialism was and how to get there, one should examine the actual capitalist system and how it can auto-destruct (with a little help from the First International). Following one's moral reactions, the strong feelings we have about exploitation and the imposition of gratuitous suffering can only lead to "utopian" schemes that guarantee failure. From that time on, we on the Left have concentrated on a purely "rational" (in this privative, nonemotional sense) analysis of the working of capitalist society (and we're still trying). This is justified enough (although we can't forget that it is "irrational" to exclude a priori felt emotions as part of the *explanans* of economic behavior). But it mustn't make

us lose sight of the role of our emotions in helping us define the society we would want to build.

And the idea that "pure" reason suffices to define the good society surfaces again in our day in a common view of the second Critical Theory, which built around discourse ethics, and/or other derivatives of Kantian ethics. These would have us believe that we can establish our universal obligations to all humans by "reason" alone, without reference to the powerful feelings that the dignity of each and every human being arouses in us. The neo-Kantian formulae vary, between, say, Habermas on the one hand and Scanlon or Korsgaard on the other. But they all have this feature that this universalist ethical basis can be shown to be an inescapable (moral) commitment, regardless of our (ethical) notions of the good life.[4]

I think that in fact all of these arguments fail, or rather that they seem right to those who accept them because they are already moved by this ideal of a universal human dignity. But I also think that this ideal of "pure" reason contributes to the bias that impoverishes Critical Theory, which consists of ignoring the dimension of patiency in defining the transformations we want to bring about.

By contrast, the resonance theory that Hartmut Rosa has been defining brings to the fore the way in which our moral life originates in strongly felt intuitions, of a demand on us to which we are called to respond. To respond adequately is to experience a deep resonance in our lives.

Resonance and control

A second crucial dimension of these issues concerns the relation between human agency and the nonhuman world. Should this agency be guided principally, or exclusively, by the requirements of instrumental rationality? Or do we also have to strive for attunement to this world?

It is at this point that my stance toward Critical Theory overlaps considerably with (and has been greatly influenced by) Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance. The choice I have outlined in this second dimension can be put in the terms of his recent magnum opus:[5] do we strive exclusively for "appropriation of the world [*Weltaneignung*]", or also reserve a place for "transformative adaptation to the world [*Weltanverwandlung*]"?

It is not just that the phenomena of resonance involve the "patiency" dimension, in the sense that an exclusive focus on agency can never do full justice to them. It is also that the focus on resonance, once one distinguishes (as Hartmut does) its different dimensions or "axes", offers an excellent perspective from which to identify and analyze the different lacks and maladies of late capitalist society that prevent us from living full lives.

It is understandable that the strong emphasis on agency, which is characteristic of Western modernity, makes it easy for us to drive ahead with projects to remake the world guided by an instrumental reason that is all the more powerful because it is informed with the impressive and ever-growing findings of modern science. This kind of remaking frequently calls for an objectification of our surroundings, by which I mean a bracketing, or utter ignoring of all meanings of things other

than the instrumental. And this can mean the loss of vital meanings, which we need to live fuller lives. The drive to control the world can end up making it *stumm*, as Hartmut puts it, that is, silencing it, so that it no longer speaks to us;[6] it can generate alienation, of the second kind mentioned here, where our relations to our world, profession, family and so forth have become indifferent, meaningless or even negative.[7]

The over-riding concern for control can not only make us ready to sacrifice much that we cannot afford to neglect but even make us blind to the sources of meaning we are repressing and negating. One of the great contributions of Hartmut's theory expounded in this book is that it helps us to map the sources and dimensions of resonance that are essential to the good life, from the needs of the body, as an "independent source of inspiration or a resonating body [*eigenständige Inspirationsquelle oder Klangkörper*]" (Rosa 2016: 176), to our relations to nature, to society, to others and also to the sources of strong evaluation, however these are understood.

One of his goals is to distinguish the different "axes of resonance [*Resonanzachsen*]": horizontal (to others and society), vertical (to the world as a totality, including the sources of strong evaluation) and "diagonal" (to the world of things).[8]

But Hartmut's theory is also a sociology. He is not only offering us a language in which we can criticize the wrong decisions we frequently make about what is important in our lives. We also have to be aware of the constraints that can force us to live lives that are alienating and that silence resonance. A crucial theme here is his theory of social acceleration, a process which makes demands that we experience as beyond individual control, which requires us to function against the rhythms of the body, or outside the time rhythms of meaningful creative action, and which is a prime source of burnout in our world.[9]

Romantic languages and the interspace

In another paper (Taylor 2017), I tried to show how much Romantic and post-Romantic poetry was a response to the fading in our civilization of the sense that we live in an ethically meaningful cosmos, with which we should strive to be in harmony. The response of Romantic poets was at once an epistemic retreat and a new source of conviction.[10]

The epistemic retreat was expressed, for instance, in the famous doctrine of Hamann, accepted by all the Romantics, that although the creation should be seen as a language from God, we can never fully grasp it but always deal in "translations" that can only approximate it. Another way of conceiving the new situation of the poet was presented in the work of a contemporary American critic, Earl Wasserman. He argued that the older invocations of cosmic order faded away in the new era, and poets devised new "subtler languages", a range of "symbols" in the sense of A.W. Schlegel – or of a philosopher of our time, Paul Ricoeur – which carried with them a strong conviction of cosmic connection and which at the same time stopped short of ontic affirmations about the nature of the world in itself.

The conviction produced concerned what we might call the "interspace" between humans and the cosmos, whatever the underlying account of what it is in the cosmos/universe as such that makes this interface possible.

One example that I gave a lot of attention to was Wordsworth's poem called for short "Tintern Abbey". This generates a strong sense of cosmic connection by invoking a "spirit" that runs through all things. This sense invokes primarily the spatial dimension. But we also live the universe in time, and here too, there can be a sense of disconnection, of time as meaningless succession, which we long to overcome. In both cases, we are dealing with what Hartmut calls the "vertical" axis of resonance (or its lack), but we are coming to this from a different angle.

Here is where Baudelaire's work becomes relevant.

Baudelaire

Many poems of Baudelaire speak of "spleen". Spleen, ennui, is an extreme state of melancholy. It is not just a condition in which we feel our exile acutely, in which the things that surround us have no meaning, do not speak to us, in which we are far from sensing the higher love that we long to follow. Much worse befalls us. We begin to lose even the sense of what meaning and love might be. The very shape of what we're lacking disappears from the world; we lose sight of the very possibility. We suffer extreme deprivation but have lost a grasp on what it is we are missing. This brings no peace but on the contrary the most profound form of despair, numbness and paralysis.

Letter to his mother of 1857: "Un immense découragement, une sensation d'isolement insupportable, une peur perpétuelle d'un malheur vague, une défiance complète de mes forces, une absence totale de désirs, une impossibilité de trouver un amusement quelconque" (Baudelaire 1973: 437–8).[11] Note that *malheur* is "vague": the distress even loses definition, and note the demobilization – *défiance de mes forces* – and absence of desire.

One of the things that characterize this despair is precisely this loss of power. It is as though we become paralyzed, incapable of acting – like what you feel in very cold water. This is close to what was called *accidia* in the religious tradition; it was precisely an extreme condition of the debility of sin.

This condition is obviously close to what Hartmut describes as one of "alienation" (already invoked previously), where our world of involvements goes "mute" (*stumm*) and becomes indifferent and meaningless.[12]

Baudelaire also sees it as one of being hemmed in, *à l'étroit*. Here from *Les Fleurs du Mal* is poem LXXVIII, entitled "Spleen":

> Quand le ciel bas et lourd pèse comme un couvercle
> Sur l'esprit gémissant en proie aux longs ennuis,
> Et que de l'horizon embrassant tout le cercle
> Il nous verse un jour noir plus triste que les nuits;

Quand la terre est changée en un cachot humide,
Où l'Espérance, comme une chauve-souris,
S'en va battant les murs de son aile timide
Et se cognant la tête à des plafonds pourris;

Quand la pluie étalant ses immense trainées
D'une vaste prison imite les barreaux,
Et qu'un people muet d'infâmes arraignées
Vient tendre ses filets au fond de nos cerveaux,

Des cloches tout à coup sautent avec furie
Et lancent vers le ciel un affreux hurlement,
Ainsi que des esprits errants sans patrie
Qui se mettent à geindre opiniâtrement.

Et de longs corbillards, sans tambour ni musique,
Défilent lentement dans mon âme; L'Espoir.
Vaincu, pleure, et l'Angoisse atroce, despotique,
Sur mon crâne incliné plante son drapeau noir.

[When low and heavy sky weighs like a lid
Upon the spirit moaning in ennui,
And when, spanning the circle of the world,
It pours a black day sadder than our nights;

When earth is changed into a sweaty cell,
In which Hope, captured, like a frantic bat,
Batters the walls with her enfeebled wing,
Striking her head against the rotting beams;

When steady rain trailing its giant train
Descends on us like heavy prison bars,
And when a silent multitude of spiders
Spins its disgusting threads deep in our brains,

Bells all at once jump out with all their force,
And hurl about a mad cacophony
As if they were those lost and homeless souls
Who send a dogged whining to the skies.

– And long cortèges minus drum or tone
Deploy morosely through my being: Hope
The conquered, moans, and tyrant Anguish gloats –
In my bowed skull he fixed his black flag.][13]

Here are powerful images of enclosure, imprisonment, despair (*chauve-souris* of strophe 2, *vaste prison* of strophe 3, final defeat of last strophe).

But for Baudelaire, spleen is also perhaps primarily a malady of time: first of all, of a time which runs down, which never renews itself, as we see in X "L'ennemi":

> Ô douleur! ô douleur! Le Temps mange la vie,
> Et l'obscur Ennemi qui nous ronge le Coeur
> Du sang que nous perdons croît et se fortifie!

> [I cry! I cry! Life feeds the seasons' maw
> And that dark Enemy who gnaws our hearts
> Battens on blood that drips into his jaws!]

Or XXX "De Profundis Clamavi", which ends:

> Je jalouse le sort des plus vils animaux
> Qui peuvent se plonger dans un sommeil stupide,
> Tant l'écheveau du temps se dévide!

> [I'm jealous of the meanest of the beasts
> Who plunge themselves into a stupid sleep –
> So slowly does the time unwind its skein!]

Once again, the poem finishes with an image of time running down, a spool that unravels: "Tant l'écheveau du temps se dévide" (verse 14). Here there is also invocation of closed in horizon, "horizon plombé" (verse 3), and also of cold, eternal winter, which paralyzes us; an image that recurs in LXXX "Le Goût du Néant": "Et le Temps m'engloutit minute par minute,/Comme la neige immense un corps pris de roideur".[14]

Spleen is here seen as a malady of time, of lived time. In a world without meaning, without even a trace of higher time, the moments of time are quite unconnected. Nothing builds up, no meaningful end is approached. One is as it were imprisoned in each moment, and yet it passes and leaves one in another similar one. Each moment passes, taking the force, the effort, the meaning one may have invested in it, without leaving anything. One is, as it were, bled by time. It "eats life". Or it thickens my prison: all I can remember is more and more such disconnected moments, which pile up on me; their cumulative effect is of being suffocated, buried. But in something cold. The corpse is stiffening.

Memories are now a burden. LXXVI "Spleen": "J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans".[15] So this disconnected time, which we can see as our being imprisoned in the moment, can also be grasped in a seemingly opposed image, of time as seemingly endless, unchanging, as slowed down almost to stasis.

(The paradox is merely apparent. In unconnected time, without narrative meaning, the past is lost, but also nothing happens. *Langweiligkeit*.)

> Rien n'égale en longueur les boiteuses journées,
> Quand sous les lourds flocons des neigeuses années
> L'ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité
> Prend les proportions de l'immortalité.

> [Nothing is longer than the limping days
> When under heavy snowflakes of the years,
> Ennui, the fruit of dulling lassitude,
> Takes on the size of immortality.]

Apt and powerful images. But what does poetry do? It begins to transform our experience. It articulates spleen, and this is a first step toward reversing it. The feature of melancholy which makes it so difficult to counter is that the sufferer can't see any reason, any cause or occasion; it is nameless, faceless; one can see no ways of combatting it. Baudelaire's poetry doesn't identify a cause, but his powerful images do give it a face. It makes spleen appear as the meaning of things it invokes, closed spaces, imprisoned bats, winter, piles of accumulating snow. These operate as symbols in Schlegel's sense, through which we have access to this malady, an alternative to its invasive, all-invading and paralyzing presence.

And then the music of the poetry itself begins to knit together the disparate meanings. It begins to transform our experience of time.

Transfigurations

Auerbach (1976) noted the use of language which shocks, which jars with the supposed dignity of the subject, and the still classical declamability of the verse. As Paul Claudel put it, Baudelaire writes like Racine, that is, with the same poetic forms; but he introduces common terms for lowly objects, like *couvercle*, *cerveaux*, not to speak of the *chauve-souris*, instead of *colombe* for hope – a tour de force which is central to the project. These common things, in the case of *couvercle* something banal and utilitarian, are brought up into a world of things which speak. There is a kind of transfiguration.[16]

Then a further transformation. In the last two strophes of "Spleen", the torpor is broken. We no longer simply have spleen as a standing condition, at the final point of congelation. But we have the diabolical action that brought it about. We live through the drama of being overcome by spleen: the howling of bells and the moaning of *esprits errants*. Terrible outbreak of disorder. And then the final conquest, of majestic beauty.

Auerbach shows how the old hierarchy is upset: This put the great, tragic, the sublime at the apex; under which came the middle, pleasing and inoffensive; finally the ridiculous, base and grotesque.[17]

This lowest now finds its place in lyric poetry. A new language was needed to release the revelation in the commonplace.

T.S. Eliot (1950: 377) says of this transposition:

> It is not merely in the use of imagery of the common life, not merely in the use of imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis, but in the elevation of such imagery to the *first intensity* – presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent much more than itself – that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men.
>
> (emphasis as in original)

And especially for Eliot himself.

This reversal of the hierarchy of references, bringing the commonplace, the ugly, the tawdry, to the highest intensity, previously reserved for the most noble realities, is one of Baudelaire's most important achievements and goes beyond his "spleen" poems. Perhaps his most famous work in this respect is "Une Charogne".

Eliot's early poetry exploits this Baudelairean breakthrough. We can see this in the first lines of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

> Let us go then you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherized upon a table;
> Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
> The muttering retreats
> Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
> And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells:
> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent
> To lead you to an overwhelming question. . .
> Oh, do not ask, "what is it?"
> Let us go and make our visit.

Here the first stanza gathers together details of the meaningless and sordid urban zones, a collection of non-places ("non-lieux" in Marc Augé's [1992] sense), in that they fail to amount to a place in the full sense of a gathering point of common meaning, the "one-night cheap hotels" that are the scene of "restless nights". In a precipitate Auerbachian descent, we plunge from the evening sky to the patient "etherized upon a table". To grasp the meaning of our condition would involve asking "an overwhelming question". But this move is denied us.

In a recurring background we have the repetition of what we suspect are trivial, empty conversations on great matters: "In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo".

And all this is clearly a malady of time. For "indeed there will be time", but in which nothing significant will happen:

> Time for you and time for me,
> And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
> And for a hundred visions and revision,
> Before the taking of a toast and tea.

The experience of time

It is not an accident that this need comes to light in the 19th century, for prior to this the very distinction between lived and "objective", or we might say, "cosmic" time didn't exist. Augustine had something analogous, when he said that when he just lived in time, it seemed quite clear to him, but once he tried to grasp it as an object of thought, it slipped away, since most of it – past and future – didn't exist.

But the full distinction, as we understand it, comes with the development of modern natural science. For Newton, time and space were unconnected from what fills them. This is already clear with the spatial dimension. Modern space is different from the older notion of place (*topos*, *locus*). A place is identified by what fills it, exists in it. Places fit together in a broader landscape. By contrast, a given volume of space is identified by its abstract coordinates, and the same space can be filled by different objects; an analogous everyday example would be a garage that houses first a truck and then my Mercedes. But we usually think of the garage as being at a place; we find it by its placement.

The same abstracting move involved in passing from places to spaces was also carried out in relation to time. When Hamlet says: "The time is out of joint/O cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right", he is not thinking of the abstract concept. The "time" is defined by the (terrible) conditions it manifests. Machiavelli's use of "i tempi" has the same, concrete sense.

But in relation to the cosmic time of physics, with its abstract coordinates, the understanding of lived time stands out as different.

Or it ought to. The problem was that much philosophy and science tended to ignore this. We can think of time and space as infinitely divisible, or as falling in to determinate, distinct units. So philosophy and psychology thought of perception as consisting of a series of impressions, of snapshots. What we get in the 19th and 20th centuries is a rebellion against this conception, which seems utterly alien to lived time.

Bergson is one of the important figures in this movement. Time isn't lived in discrete units but can only be captured as flow, *durée*. Husserl and Heidegger develop and alter this basic insight. The philosophico-scientific issue was how to rescue lived time from its scientistic distortion. The issues raised in Baudelaire's spleen poems can't even be formulated if we fail to do this.

Lived time needs to be shaped by stories, narrative. For narrative, not all moments are of equal significance; there are, for instance, turning points, where crucial issues are decided (decisive battles are an example in history).

But there are other ways in which some moments count more than others. Where higher times are recognized, for instance in our civilization, God's eternity, as gathered time; and the time of origins, there are moments in ordinary time which come closer to these. For instance, high feasts in the liturgical calendar, like Easter; or on a pilgrimage, we gradually approach a climax of higher time, as we advance to our goal. "Knots" of time accrete around these high moments. And something analogous happens with certain places: sites of great liturgical contact with the higher, Rome, Canterbury, Assisi; or Mecca; or Varanasi, and so on. Knots of time gather around them; and that's why they are sites of pilgrimage; and even ordinary tourists flock to them, savor them, feel something powerful there.

These time-gathering sites also gather people; they become "lieux de mémoire" for nations and civilizations (Pierre Nora). An important question arises: is there a need for new forms of gathered time, of contact across great gaps? Why does Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu*, which builds toward such a contact, speak to us so powerfully?

But now the objectifying stance behind our notion of cosmic time not only distorts our understanding of lived time. It opens the prospect of organizing time, so that our activities can be more productive and (instrumentally) rational. But to what extent do these "rational" organizings make our time unlivable, as with assembly lines, for instance.

Baudelaire's *plaidoyer* for livable time can also be drawn on to criticize such rational organizings, as we see with Walter Benjamin.

Baudelaire's spleen comes out of a kind of dislocation of time, an endless time, a timeless time, dragging on without change or end. We are imprisoned in the momentary but borderless time, which is incessantly repeated. This is the temporal equivalent of no-spaces.

Now this connects up to an important dimension of modern experience, as Benjamin (1977) shows in his comment on Baudelaire. Workers on an assembly line,[18] for instance, or in another way, compulsive gamblers,[19] are reduced to this kind of time experience. And Hartmut Rosa (2013) shows how this is a widespread experience in today's accelerated society, where imposing various kinds of alien time-use or time-sequencing on people is common: forcing people to work without regard for their bodily rhythms, for instance. This is bad but a quite different kind of bad from time-uses that make action meaningless, like assembly lines where my movements are controlled by the machine, and where I just react, and can't act in pursuit of the ultimate goal. This involves the kind of *compulsive identical repetition* that Benjamin points to.

Place as gathering time

This knitting together can be seen at its most powerful in the latter half of LXXXIX "Le Cygne". The massive reconstruction of Paris by Haussman is lived as another meaningless succession: "Paris change! Mais rien dans ma mélancholie/N'a bougé! . . . /Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs".[20] Starting two

stanzas later, the poem brings together, in a vast connection across history, exiles of all times and all nations.

But then (verse 31): "tout pour moi devient allégorie".[21] This is an important turning point. First, "becoming allegory" can be understood in two senses. Either a thinning out of the world: things lose their meaning and their substance; we can only give them meaning by seeing them as allegories. Or else, allegory in the rich sense – that besides their full existence, things show a deeper meaning. The first kind of allegory is just applied from outside by the desperate viewer; the second comes to us as a deeper vision. The first is a desperate maneuver within ennui; the second overcomes it.

And then a strange thing happens here. We start off with the first, and then the second takes over. Already previously, verse 24, the swan had become "mythe étrange et fatal".[22] And now we start thinking of the swan again with a sense of oppression: "une image m'opprime" (verse 33).[23]

But in the course of describing this a great reversal happens. Instead of petrification comes movement. "Je pense" repeated, moving from scene to scene, first from the swan to Andromache, and then on from suffering being to suffering being, all suffering in exile. The movement comes alive, and these beings are in a sense resurrected, brought together, in one great company of compassion, which includes the swan, and also the author. The circle widens out, in the end has no exact limits: "à bien d'autres encor!" (verse 52).[24] (And we must include in their number Victor Hugo, to whom the poem is dedicated and who was then in exile in Jersey from the France of Napoleon III.)

Before the souvenirs were "plus lourds que les rocs" (verse 32). Now "dans la forêt où mon esprit s'exile/Un vieux Souvenir sonne plein souffle du cor!" (verses 49–50: is it significant that "cor" is palindrome of "roc"?).[25]

What is this change? We can think of it as all taking place within one traditional understanding of melancholy: the view that it takes two forms, the ecstasy of unitive intuition, but also torpor of hebetude or ennui. Here we have shifted from the second to the first. The move comes with Andromache, now "Auprès du tombeau vide en extase courbée" (verse 39).[26] ("Extase" means literally "sortir de soi".)

But what does ecstasy mean, what does it here consist in? Another way of inhabiting time. Neither just the impotent loss of melancholy-ennui, nor the controlling overview-objectification. But a kind of accord, solidarity, sympathy, across the ages. Its only possible vehicle is compassionate identification – a compassion for suffering humanity, which includes the author. (Does this amount to what Benjamin calls for, a kind of rescuing ["retten"] of the past?) It is anyway as though these people are alive again.

In talking of Guys, Baudelaire (1975: 699) talks of his "mémoire résurrectioniste, évocatrice, une mémoire qui dit à chaque chose: 'Lazare, lève-toi!'".[27]

It is important to stress the time dimension. The poem comes together in the theme of exile. Part of what constitutes exile for the author, along with sin, and the reduction of ennui, is the inexorable passage of time as mere meaningless change, and this is intensified by the deconstruction-reconstruction of Paris by Haussmann under the Second Empire, which meant a loss of surroundings which were those

of earlier meaning (verse 7: "Le vieux Paris n'est plus").[28] The new stuff is itself temporary; or perhaps worse, it makes claim to monumental duration, as with Haussmann's creations. But there is something pathetic and infinitely sad about these modern imitations of ancient monumental. The claim is to over-arch time, to be still in contact with what was and what will be. But without rituals of recurrence, which bring key moments close together (e.g., pilgrimages or parliaments), this can't be credible. It can't be made credible just on the basis of stone and form. The stone wears, and the style changes, and one has a sense of pathos, distance, yesterday's triumph. The depressing reminder of distance, on the way eventually to having the pleasing melancholy of a ruin.

Keeping this sense of a place as gathering times was easier when our worldview included multidimensional time. Cathedrals were time-gatherers, and part of their power for us today, beyond any faith commitment, comes from our remembering this. The totalizing hegemony of secular time threatens to carry away past moments of fullness, without hope of recurrence.

In thus striving to bring times together again, Baudelaire anticipates Proust.

Baudelaire is a complex figure. He had not only a nascent "poète maudit" side but also a compassionate side. Here the second wins out, in an outpouring of solidary identification.

Poetry and resonance

Baudelaire raises our often sordid surroundings, our meaningless repetitions, to what Eliot calls "first intensity". He does this by running through these surroundings at the rhythm of a time that is repaired, restored. This has some relation to what Proust later will call "le temps retrouvé".

The patterns, rhythms, connections in the poetry open us to patterns and rhythms in the time of the world, and contact with these render our lived experience meaningful again. This is not something the poet does to the world, as when I clear a forest to make a field. It is something that his work makes visible, palpable, something that it enables both poet and reader to see.

Notes

1 The republican or civic humanist tradition, to which Rousseau belongs, obviously gives supreme importance to a certain kind of agency, that of the citizen. At its highest, this kind of agency wins glory and a lasting fame. But the new re-writing of this tradition by Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner, which redefines the value of republican citizen relations in terms of the negative freedom of non-domination stresses even more unfettered agency at the expense of notions of the good life.

2 For a subtle and perspicuous discussion of the different facets of alienation, see Jaeggi 2014; see also Henning 2020.

3 See Costa 2017: 14.

4 I have argued this at some length in Taylor 2016, chapter 6, section 3.

5 See Rosa 2016: 52–60.

6 See Rosa 2016: 278–9.

7 See Rosa 2016: 305.

8 See Rosa 2016: 331.
9 See Rosa 2016: 180.
10 I spoke in that paper, and will speak in this one, primarily about poetry, but I think that analogous points could be made about other creative media: music, visual arts, in the last two centuries.
11 "But what I do feel is an immense discouragement, a sensation of unbearable isolation, a perpetual fear of some remote disaster, an utter disbelief in my capacity, a total absence of desire, an impossibility of finding any kind of interest". Editors' note: this translation of Baudelaire's letter is from Arthur Symons (Baudelaire 1971: 116).
12 See Rosa 2016: 278–9, 305.
13 Editors' note: all English translations of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* quoted here are from James McGowan (Baudelaire 1993).
14 "And Time engulfs me in its steady tide, / As blizzards cover corpses with their snow"
15 "More memories than if I'd lived a thousand years!"
16 Reference to "Le Couvercle", verses 13 and 14 (Baudelaire 1975: 141).
17 See Auerbach 1976: 153.
18 See Benjamin 1977: 208–9.
19 See Benjamin 1977: 209–14.
20 "Paris may change, but in my melancholy mood / Nothing has budged! . . . / And my dear memories are heavier than stone."
21 "New palaces, blocks, scaffoldings, / Old neighbourhoods, are allegorical for me"
22 "sad and fatal myth"
23 "an image gives me pause"
24 "many others more!"
25 "And likewise in the forest of my exiled soul / Old Memory sings out a full note of the horn!"
26 "Next to an empty tomb, head bowed in ecstasy"
27 "a resurrecting and evocative memory, a memory that says to every object: 'Lazarus, arise'". Editors' note: this translation of Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life* is from P.E. Charvet (Baudelaire 2010: 42).
28 "The old Paris is gone"

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5   Responsive encounters

Latour's modes of being and the sociology of world relations

Hartmut Rosa

At the very end of his monumental work on the modes of existence, Bruno Latour (2013: 485) reveals that he is after no less than absolutely everything: saving the world, on the one hand, and the ultimate question of all forms of existence on the other. Into what sort of world are we born? Whom or what do we face as we exist? What is the nature of our relationship with the world?

In a way, any attempt to do justice to Bruno Latour's thinking and, in particular, his recent main work *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (2013) is doomed to failure. We may well assume that the author himself is rather pleased with that fact, as he had always planned for his book to be a vibrantly scintillating, lively, continually transforming, dialogical piece of writing whose substance and significance simply cannot be pinned down, instead surprising the interested reader over and over again in ever-changing forms. He has presented and transformed it during a series of workshops featuring experts from all backgrounds; he has translated it into a major exhibition titled *Reset Modernity* at the Karlsruhe Center for Art and Media in 2016; most importantly, he has brought it to life as an international, multidimensional online project with an open platform (AIME, on http://modesofexistence.org). In this digital environment, the text is continuously commented upon, expanded and linked in a collaborative effort that prevents the manifestation of any truly final shape. Even the conventionally published version of his work, on which this chapter is based, defies all fundamental principles of academic rigor. Latour does not cite a single source; he foregoes empirical evidence and does not make any attempt to place his musings into the context of an existing body of competing research. His book contains neither footnotes nor a bibliography. As an ethnographic study of the "Moderns", it has moments of literary adventure fiction, but its language and arguments are exceedingly abstract and philosophical.

Not only does this formal openness correspond to the fundamental substance of the work, it is also rather consistent with the author's theoretical position. What Latour wants is to overcome a specifically scientific worldview that seeks to set clear boundaries between objects and subjects and pinpoint meaning as a function of *Double Click* – Latour's most despised mode of existence, which he curses as the "Devil" and "Evil Genius" of modernity (Latour 2013: 93f., 217f.). *Double Click* is characterized by the assumption that we can recognize, instrumentalize

and regulate the world without at all *transforming* it in the process, so that truth can only lay claim to that which proves to be incorruptible and immutable in the face of all attacks or instrumentalizations. Looking closely, this turns out to be *nothing*, of course – above all, it most certainly is not Latour's new book. His latest work strives to change its own meaning, its significance, with every reading and, of course, with every modification.

Latour is not after epistemology – he does not care to theorize on knowledge. What he wants is to save the world and its people, or save the world from its people, or, more precisely: save the world for the sake of its people. The "Moderns" are, after all, at grave risk of losing their world as they buckle under the triple pressure of the scientific, technological and economic claim to world domination, expressed in Latour's notations as three corresponding modes of existence: "REF", "Double Click" and "REP". They are losing the world by making it mute and denying its ability to transform and respond. "By losing the world that they thought they had left to these doubly ill-conceived amalgams of matter, the Moderns deprived themselves, as it were, of 'any sense of morality'" (ibid.: 456). It is no coincidence that Latour remains so attached to the unscientific, seemingly esoteric notion of "Gaia": in 2013, he dedicated his six Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh to it, which he had entitled *Facing Gaia* (Latour 2017). The dramatic final sentences of *Modes of Existence*, too, refer to her, the Greek goddess:

> [I]f Gaia is against us, then *not much* is permitted any longer. While we wait for Gaia, it isn't the sense of the absurd that threatens us now, but rather our lack of adequate preparation for the civilization to come. It is that civilization that our inquiry seeks to praise in advance, in order to ward off the worst.
>
> (Latour 2013: 486)

Latour makes it clear that Gaia is neither the Goddess in sovereign command somewhere beyond the world nor the silent, "unspoilt" nature that we utilize as a resource and a canvas and that is wholly indifferent to our human endeavors. In fact, it is those two very concepts that have ultimately landed us with the economic "dystopia" (ibid.: 23), the scientific loss of the world and the environmental catastrophe facing Westernized modernity today. He rather understands Gaia as a consciously acting, responding actor in the sense of Actor–Network Theory (ANT). He speaks of a "political theology" of nature and, referring to Sloterdijk, a "Monogäism": "There is no God, there is only one Earth" (ibid.: 458). Latour's central idea is that nature – specifically, that which stands in contrast with human activity, research and cognition – in the Anthropocene suddenly becomes sensitive to the said activity and seemingly begins to react to it (with natural disasters, for instance). This leads the late Moderns to believe that they are dealing with a *responsible* being.

> Travelers who fly over the Greenland glaciers have the upsetting experience of seeing that what passed for a magnificent decor on previous trips has changed meaning and is now becoming something on which the survival of

airplane travel depends in part, and something on which we depend in part for our own survival.

<div align="right">(ibid.: 457)</div>

In other words, what is changing and what matters to Latour is the type of relation we have with that which we face as the "world". And this is the core of this book and, perhaps, of Latour's thinking as a whole: rather than analyzing modes of knowledge, he wants to investigate *modes of existence*, which are characterized by creating both the recognizing, experiencing subject and that which it encounters as its world. He writes, for instance, that the scientific mode of existence (REF) is nothing but "a network of instruments and formalisms that produces, at its opposite ends, knowledge and knowers" (ibid.: 92).

Latour's expositions about the plurality of the modes of existence or, indeed, the *ontologies* aim to express that subjects and objects as "beings" never exist in absolute terms; one can – or should – merely ask how they relate to each other. The point of his arguments, then, is that the forms of relation which are produced by science, law, politics, art or religion – or rather which *are* science, law or religion – do not only have their own representations and interpretations of "the world". Much more radically, each also produces its own worlds, realities and entities, process chains and modes of connection: hence the term "modes of *existence*". With this term, he seeks to overcome the now sterile, infertile contrasts of subject and object, individual and society, immanence and transcendence (cf. Laux 2014). Each mode of existence, each mode of being, brings forth its own transcendences, entities and structures – its own ontologies with specific forms of truth and truth-telling. To Latour, poetic, religious, aesthetic and moral truths are just as real as economic, legal or scientific truths: ontology and epistemology cannot be separated.

Latour thus seeks to overcome the conceptual "monism of being" (Latour 2013: 20), which is prevalent in science and culture and manifests itself wherever religion and natural science claim to explain "the world" (or the functional laws of the world) and which has caused widespread "ontological famine" or "anemia" among the Moderns (ibid.: 301, 163), in favor of "more diversity in the beings admitted to existence" (ibid.: 21). His conceptualization points toward a many-worlds interpretation of modernity, but his primary interest lies in exploring what happens when those worlds touch or "cross": when they come into conflict and transform each other. It is those crossings that introduce movement and dynamism into the interplay of the worlds.

Ultimately, Latour's sociology revolves around analyzing the diversity of constitutive, *world-creating* world *relations* that modernity has brought about in its modes of existence and their interrelationships. Perhaps, we can pin down the argument spun through his meandering expositions in this particular insight: that those relations have become one-sided and rigid over time (see Bueno in this volume), revealing a tendency to deny their own interdependence as much as the truths, values and experiences of other non-modern or counter-modern world relations and modes of existence.

Latour believes that the previously discussed loss of the world is a direct consequence of modernity's asymmetrical anthropology (see the introduction to this volume). Its scientific and legal, political and economic modes of existence presuppose that there are no acting, reacting, demanding or *appealing* entities other than us humans "out there": what we face is a silent, passive world whose sole purpose is to be modified and recognized. Besides an ecological crisis and an economic dystopia, it has created a moral catastrophe of disorientation. Latour claims that "a responsible being is one who responds to an appeal" (ibid.: 456), adding:

> In the most ordinary experiences, responding always has to mean answering an external *appeal*. Otherwise those who feel responsible would all be deranged souls to whom voices speak in profound silence.
>
> (ibid.: 457)

Modernity has cut itself off from the world, as it were, by reducing it to mere facts and a "moral law" and by inventing a God who rules over the world from far beyond. To break free from their calamitous situation, the Moderns need another way of accessing the "universe"; they must regain possession of a, as it were, "tonal" world to which they can relate by listening and responding: "This changes if we give them back a conduit to a multiverse capable of being deployed according to the particular tonality of morality, among others" (ibid.: 458).

While modernity is, in fact, rather familiar with such different modes of relating to the world, they are no longer marked on its dominant epistemic and ontological map. Latour perceives the experience of being *appealed to*, being *addressed* in an entirely Biblical sense, as the fundamental experience and the essence of religion. That is precisely why religion, to him, constitutes a special mode of existence that is virtually impossible to escape, even though it stands in marked contrast to the scientific, economic and technical modes of existence: "it is impossible not to speak of a religious mode" (ibid.: 297).

In introducing this concept, Latour explicitly refers to William James' groundbreaking exploration of the diversity of religious experience, which includes the following definition of religion:

> Religion, whatever it is, is a man's total reaction upon life. . . . Total reactions are different from casual reactions, and total attitudes are different from usual or professional attitudes. To get at them you must go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which in some degree everyone possesses. This sense of the world's presence, appealing as it does to our peculiar individual temperament, makes us either strenuous or careless, devout or blasphemous, gloomy or exultant, about life at large; and our reaction, involuntary and inarticulate and often half unconscious as it is, is the completest of all our answers to the question, "What is the character of this universe in which we dwell?"
>
> (James 1958: 45; cf. Latour 2005: 27f.)

This notion of religion suggests a mode of perceiving the world and existence within it as a whole, not merely in a situational and instrumental sense but comprehensively. Religion is the mode of existence that focuses on our relationship with the world – or the worlds – as a whole. Latour may not put it into words quite as explicitly, but we may perhaps deduce that religion is about the nature of our relationship with Gaia, where Gaia represents, according to Karl Jaspers (2001), an all-encompassing entity:

> It is now before Gaia that we are summoned to appear: Gaia, the odd, doubly composite figure made up of science and mythology used by certain specialists to designate the Earth that surrounds us and that we surround, the Möbius strip of which we form both the inside and the outside, the truly global Globe that threatens us even as we threaten it.
>
> (Latour 2013: 9)

This surprising twist, however, does not make Latour a theologian or metaphysicist: he radically decouples the religious experience from any cognitive substance – that is, from belief *in something*. Those seeking to understand the inspiring ideals and experiences of the religious mode of existence (and this is precisely what Latour strives to determine for each mode of existence) must grasp that religion is

> absolutely nothing to do with belief. . . . And especially not with believing *in* something, in someone, in the unnameable, the unprofferable G. . . . Yes, in these matters of religion . . . belief in G. is absolutely not involved and, so, cannot define any kind of boundary between believers and non-believers, the faithful and the infidels.
>
> (Latour 2002: 3)

Hence Latour's insistence that the premise of religious matters being intrinsically matters of belief constitutes a central misclassification of modernity. He logically concludes that "it would . . . be absurd to ask religious beings to rely on more durable, more assured, more immediate, more continuous substances" (Latour 2013: 311).

If we can at all claim that Latour has undergone a shift on religious matters, we must join him in understanding religion as a representation of an alternative mode of world relation. But how can this other mode of existence be defined more precisely? Surprisingly, Latour applies the experience of "love crises" (ibid.: 300) as a pattern for religious experiences. Romantic relationships transform their subjects: they feel addressed, they feel touched, and by that touch, they are transformed. Similarly, the religious experience is an experience of opening up and being captured by another: it is the experience of being transformed both internally and externally by a sensation that cannot be comprehended in terms of a causal and mechanical interaction – what makes it special, instead, is its capacity to make the experiencer feel alive and complete. The essence of the religious as

well as the romantic experience, then, lies in a *responsible relation* or *encounter* that overcomes the unfamiliarity and indifference in the relationship between the self and the world; it lies in the perception of an "appeal" (ibid.: 457). To Latour, religion is the one mode of existence that can establish resonance between the subject and the world, even between all entities or beings (ibid.: 480), thus saving them from the terrible fate of an eternally indifferent or hostile world relation. By extension, this also means every experience that allows us to feel connected with "the world" or "the cosmos" in a vivid, breathing, transformational manner, every experience that exudes the power of a poignant and transformational encounter, is ultimately a religious experience in Latour's sense of the term.

> What wretchedness, never to have aroused anything but indifference! For we don't draw the certainty of existing and being close, of being unified and complete, that allows us to discover angels bearing tumults of the soul, from our own resources but from elsewhere: we receive it as an always unmerited gift that circulates through the narrow channel of these salutary words. Very special words: words that bear beings capable of renewing those to whom they are addressed.
>
> (ibid.: 302f.)

Religious experiences, then, are always characterized by elusiveness: they cannot be forced to occur or produced systematically. They are external. That is why, surprisingly, angels rather than gods are Latour's paradigmatic embodiments of religiousness: they "bear tumults of the soul" (ibid.: 303) and, in doing so, are wholly elusive; their appearance has a transformational effect – they transform persons (ibid.: 303, 191f.). As his argument goes on, Latour alternates between angels and words as the carriers of religiousness; he attributes the same transformational power to words and confers an ontological status on them:

> It would not be of much use to say that religious beings [REL] are "only words", since the words in question transport beings that convert, resuscitate, and save persons. Thus they are truly beings; there's really no reason to doubt this. They come from outside, they grip us, dwell in us, talk to us, invite us; we address them, pray to them, beseech them.
>
> (ibid.: 308)

In other words, we enter into a responsible relationship with them, and it is this mode of existence, characterized by being addressed and reactively transforming ourselves, that Latour identifies as the religious mode.

In rediscovering this mode of existence and in "liberating" religion from its dogmatic and cognitive burdens, Latour sees an opportunity to escape the confusions and dangers of modernity, as this allows us to recall the genuine experience of an alternative way of existing in the world and relating to the world. To Latour, *hearing* and *speaking* are at the center of this mode of existence (ibid: 306), not *controlling* and *dominating*, the essential characteristics of the prevalent scientific,

technical and economic world relations (cf. also Rosa 2019: 459). The latter characteristics (and the cognitivist and dogmatic narrowing of religion) have led to the Moderns experiencing nature as a "dead" and "silent" thing even as they seek to conserve it. In contrast, the religious experience places us in a vivid world awash with poignant, transformational and, as such, creative encounters. It changes the quality of our world relation by overcoming the rigid separation between human beings capable of resonance, on the one hand, and a silent, "odourless" (Latour 2013: 457) world of "nature" and "artefacts", on the other, which Latour identifies as a misleadingly asymmetrical anthropology (Latour 1993). In his essay *Will Non-humans Be Saved?* (2009), Latour writes that religion can save or "deliver" not just humans but also things and nonhuman beings, as it is capable of bringing the "close" to life and preparing it for a creative transformation:

> I defined the religious tradition by its ability to operate two transformations: a radical transformation of the far away into the close and the proximate (what was dead is now alive) and a positive view of all artificial transformations (against any tendency to conserve what it is). And I suggested that this could be exactly what was needed to extend the range of concerns, passions, and energy that the overly narrow "ecological consciousness" could not possess because of its unfortunate adhesion to the "conservation of nature" and its ilk.
>
> (Latour 2009: 473)

The power which Latour attributes to religion is that of transforming the fixed, indifferent world relation that characterizes modernity into one marked by (libidinous and romantic) attachment. He leaves no doubt that it is that very power which we will need to overcome the planetary ecological crisis and the dystopia of the economy: "ecologisation" as the basis of a "civilisation to come" (Latour 2013: 475) requires no less than a whole new type of world relation. Again, he utilizes the concept of Gaia to represent this transformation: the notion of facing Gaia in flesh and blood as she speaks with her very own voice evokes a very different world relation to the idea of protecting a helpless or indifferent nature.

> [R]eligion demand[s] a level of radical transformation compared to which the ecological gospel looks like a timid appeal to buy new garbage cans. . . . [P]erhaps we can postpone [the] Apocalypse: religion could become a powerful alternative to modernizing and a powerful help for ecologizing provided that a connection can be established (or rather re-established) between religion and Creation instead of religion and nature.
>
> (Latour 2009: 263f.)

When Latour refers to religion, he – unlike the dominant religious traditions – does not speak of a mode of existence (and a mode of relating) that strives to establish a connection with *another* world. Rather, its purpose is to establish a *different way* of experiencing the *existing* world. The change of perspective – the change of world relation or, in Latour's terms, of "tonality" – that takes place

as one enters this mode of existence is not optional to Latour. It is an ecological necessity. Without it, our transformation into a new, sustainable civilization is doomed to fail; without it, the "negotiations" we must begin with representatives of traditions, practices, values, languages and experiences that exist beyond the modern Western world are hopeless: we may well be willing to open our minds to other modes of existence and their experiences and values, but we simply would not have the ability.

This interpretation is most certainly not the only way of reading Latour's monumental study. His work is simply too open-ended and, frequently, too esoteric, abstract and scintillating to be reduced to a coherent formula; he spins too complex a web between the modes of existence of not only law and science, religion and politics but also technology, organization, attachment, Double Click and so forth (cf. the tabular overview, Latour 2013: 488f.). At the same time, Latour becomes entangled in rather too many contradictions and inconsistencies, such as the unsolved question of whether and how his own project belongs to the mode of existence of scientific investigation. Where it does, it fails the tonalities of the other modes by definition; where it does not, it loses the claim of being an academic study. This is not merely an abstract, theoretical problem: some parts read as though all modes of existence can be examined on the basis and with the tools of the same rationality and within the same world (ibid.: 307), while in others, Latour appears to suggest that each mode gives rise to its own rationality and world. The same issue also manifests itself in the aforementioned lack of empirical evidence, the gaps in Latour's reasoning and the imprecisions of his rambling exposition. Ultimately and, perhaps, most importantly, Latour's study may not even live up to its own standards. After all, he unfortunately fails to apply to his own book the tests that he personally designed to assess the suitability of a method and analysis (ibid.: 476–80, 65).

In this light, his objective of proposing a new "system of coordinates" (ibid.: 10) and a new "metalanguage" (ibid.: 21), not only for science but indeed for humanity as a whole, appears overly ambitious. But Latour does succeed in another, quite impressive endeavor that may well be crucial for the future of our civilization: he directs our gaze away from the substantial, propositional *content* of that which is negotiated, experienced, recognized or modified and toward the dominant forms and modes of relation. "Prepositions" are a crucial element of Latour's analysis of the modes of existence; he deems them creators of relations. The individual preposition defining each mode of existence plays "a decisive role . . . by offering the type of relation needed to grasp the experience of the world in question" (ibid.: 57). As we have seen before, the type of relation gives rise to the subject and the object, to values, experiences and even truths. "They are not the foundation of anything and yet everything depends on them" (ibid.: 58), because they specify the *tonality* of a world and, in turn, everything that is considered attractive, repulsive or indifferent within it. Latour, then, ultimately outlines the program of a comparative historical analysis and a political and cultural "negotiation" of the possible types of world relations. He has sound arguments for his claim that this

may bear the key to a "civilisation to come", which might offer us an opportunity to overcome the ecological, economic and moral crises of our current modernity.

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Part 2

The powers of matter, life and affect

6 Power, affect, society

Critical theory and the challenges of (Neo-)Spinozism*

Martin Saar

Introduction: Spinoza today

Imagine the following scenario. There is a general dissatisfaction with contemporary social theory and current political philosophy. Many mainstream models and theories seem unproductive and exhausted, political liberalism too unpolitical, the ever returning Neomarxism too reductionist, ethical liberalism too individualist and old and new communitarianism and Neo-Hegelianism too substantialist, most of political theory too institutionalist, most of cultural theory too culturalist, most of poststructuralism too discourse-oriented, most of the New Materialisms and Neo-Deleuzianisms too body-fixated, neo-Anarchism too naive and theories of hegemony too much in love with the state and the fantasy of its takeover.

If this scenario sounds familiar, it will come as no surprise that several theorists in recent years were looking for alternative approaches; many claim to have found a framework that might escape these unattractive options. The desideratum is an integrated and general but highly differentiated and empirically adaptable theory of the social in which actors and processes, persons and groups, time and becoming, stability and transformation can be accounted for. To this end, there is a major and rather recent trend in contemporary social theory to build on concepts and ideas adapted from 17th-century Dutch-Jewish philosopher Baruch de Spinoza. This surprising renaissance has its roots in significant interpretations by Althusser, Deleuze and Negri, among others, in the multifaceted feminist appropriations of Spinoza and in the "turn to ontology" that has shaped some recent discussions in political philosophy (cf. White 2000).

While theorists like Antonio Negri, Etienne Balibar, Frédéric Lordon and Vittorio Morfino, Moira Gatens, Susan James and Hasana Sharp have taken this route rather explicitly, many Spinoza scholars working on more interpretative or historical questions, like Alexandre Matheron, Pierre Macherey, Jean-François Moreau, Yirmiyahu Yovel and Manfred Walther, have also contributed significantly to this approach. There is no "school", however, since the systematic conclusions for contemporary theory derived from Spinoza vary widely given the various contexts they occur in. It makes a difference whether you start from Spinoza's non-dualistic thinking of the body, his concept of the imagination, his vitalist ontology and the *conatus*, or his political conception of the multitude and its power. Nevertheless,

there is a coherence in certain references, systematic gestures and methodological assumptions. "(Neo-)Spinozism" might be used as a shorthand for a family of approaches and concepts starting from there.

There is quite obviously a substantial proximity of (Neo-)Spinozism and some strands of New Materialism, as can be seen in the frequent invocations of Spinoza in the works of Jane Bennett, Rosi Braidotti or Brian Massumi, but this would be a topic for another occasion. Following the ambition and goal of this volume, I will instead propose assessing in rather general terms, and without too many references to the more specific discussions, the importance of Spinoza for a critical social theory today. Since my own view centers on the Spinozian conception of power that forms the core of a general but dynamic ontology with serious consequences for thinking about society, individuality, the social bond, collective bodies, institutions, laws, democracy and radical social transformation, I start with a short summary of these issues (in the first section). I proceed to outline the contours of a social theory building on an affect-theoretical orientation anchored in this general ontology but specifying it in terms of a theory of affections and affectivity (in the second section). I then turn (in the third section) to a conclusion that asks whether (or how) this paradigm that obviously shares many traits with many new materialist theories of the social also relates to the ambitions and stakes of Critical Theory (as commonly understood) and how it can contribute to "critical theory" (with a small c).

An ontology of power

One might claim, and many commentators have done so, that the entire thinking of Spinoza is centered on the notion of power.[1] This is so because whatever he says about God, nature, cognition, life or desire is framed in a perspective that tries to explicate dynamic relations, the play of forces and the factors that facilitate or prohibit, that empower or weaken the capacity to act of each being in question. In the widest, categorical sense, "power" (or *potentia*) is nothing else than the name for specific relations of potentiality, and Spinoza's thinking quite generally is the thinking of potential effects, of what is made possible and impossible in a given situation by given forces and capacities. Power or *potentia* in Spinoza's metaphysics is of course not equivalent to the modern notion of political or social "power". Rather, and in line with neo-Stoic and late scholastic and neo-Aristotelian usage at the time, it is a basic metaphysical notion that helps to formulate ontological principles. The term "power" here does not necessarily refer – as in contemporary usage – to relations between persons or institutions in which someone or something "has" or "holds" power over another. It is rather a concept that defines or specifies being as such. Talking about the being of something, Spinoza implicitly claims, involves talking about its power, about its capacity to do or constitute something. Therefore, power is always plural: It is the power of something that is always already in relation to the power of others. To know *what* something is, is to know *its power*. Its power belongs to it, in as much as power is what it is; in this sense, power is an ontological notion.

Of course, everything Spinoza officially says about power within his rationalist metaphysics is connected to the ultimate power, the power of God (or *potentia dei*) on which in this ontological model everything depends.[2] While this presupposition might be hard to swallow for any modern political and social theory, the attractive methodological move is to follow Spinoza in starting from power as the central notion of explication and analysis. Furthermore, the name "God" for Spinoza is an equivalent for the totality of nature, the ontological productivity of the whole and all that is within it. Three points seem to follow rather generally from such a framework.

Constitution

Talking about power ontologically means to leave behind the level of the theory of action. If power is a capacity of – a – being as such, power is more than the "possession" of an agent; and power cannot be reduced to the exercise of power of an agent. Ontologically speaking, every existence or life already happens or embodies itself in forms or figures of power, because what a thing can do *is* in its power. Human power in this sense, the power of a human being, is determined by what the human body and mind can do, how they relate to other minds and bodies that influence their actions and passions (physically, psychologically and intellectually). Therefore, power is nothing that comes as a new element into a social situation but its very condition. There is no being without power (in this sense of *potentia*) because power constitutes being (and all beings, like things, persons, etc.). Thus, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza's famous determination of the *conatus* as the desire to "persist in one's own being" specifies what a thing is by pointing to its driving force, its potentiality of self-preservation or its striving for self-persistence (Spinoza 1994: 159, proposition 6 of part III). But what this means is that there is nothing without or beyond power; power, in this sense and to use a famous line from 20th-century social theory, "is everywhere" (Foucault 1978: 93).

Relationality

This ubiquity implied in the ontological conception of power extends to the human realm and to the powers of human beings. Spinoza is a thinker about individuality (as a form of individuation of the one substance) but he is no individualist. The power of human beings is related to their individual bodies and minds but also exceeds them: every power relates to itself but also to others with which it competes, interacts or combines itself. In Spinoza's political philosophy, the political and social implications of this way of thinking become particularly apparent. For him, the theory of the state is a special case of his general philosophy of power. The power of the state and of the political community ultimately rests on the power generated and enacted by the multiplicity of political subjects, the *multitudo* as he calls it (echoing Hobbes and Suarez and some of the classical Roman writers).[3]

What this means is that the power of the multitude is a power *between*, not *of* individual human subjects. The power of the multitude (*potentia multitudinis*) is no collective or superpower that emerges out of the harmonious consensus of its members but the always temporary and always precarious product of collective action in which the individual powers reinforce each other mutually. This can only happen when the multitude is "guided as though by a single mind" – this is Spinoza's recurrent formula for the unstable quasi-unity of the people in a well-governed polity.[4] This also means that politics is a realm of inter- or rather "transindividuality", as Balibar has famously called it.[5] In effective politics, individuals transcend themselves and enter into transformative relationships with others. Every new form of power will necessarily remain relational; the social will therefore always be transindividual, a social realm with multiple individuals; power is not a possession but, we might say, a medium, an in-between of individual bodies and forces.

Accumulation

The first two features of Spinoza's concept of power already show how far his use of the term is removed from contemporary usage in which actors have or hold power over others. Power for him, first, is a medium of constitution; it is a ubiquitous medium of the social. It is, second, never the possession of a single actor but a differential, relational entity in a plural play of forces. As I already alluded to, there is a third, a quantitative or comparative dimension in his approach, giving his conception a particular twist. For systematic reasons, Spinoza opposes the view that there is only one site or locality of power or that power can have a stable center. This does not imply that power is distributed equally throughout the political field. Spinoza's break with the traditional, purely instrumental conception of power derives from the idea that power follows a certain logics of accumulation, of the increase of forces.

This ontological principle acquires specific importance on the level of politics. Whereas his predecessor Hobbes was mainly emphasizing the competition of forces – forces fighting each other – Spinoza also posits a counter-dynamics – forces joining and combining themselves and therefore gaining a new form that exceeds the powers of the individuals. Joining forces or accumulating power might lead to new levels of associated power that emerge out of the power of the accumulation itself. Forces (or powers) therefore do not necessarily compete with or fight each other; there is always the possibility of new alliances, combinations and temporary unions. Politics, for Spinoza, is the art of facilitating these unions in a way in which the multiplicity of powers yields creation rather than destruction.

Spinoza's dynamical social ontology, therefore, knows two fundamental modalities of power: destruction and creation, confrontation and accumulation. Rational politics for him is the attempt to mobilize the latter and minimize the former. Political actors can never be sure in advance which direction the coming together of two forces will take. We might call this perspective a view that starts

from the fundamental ambivalence of power, or of power's double potentiality. The accumulation of power is neither to be avoided or reduced nor a good or goal in itself. Let me just add as an aside that this axiom is what singles out Spinoza's theory of power from many other current approaches in philosophy and the social sciences that conceptually reduce power to one of its modes: *either* domination *or* empowerment.[6]

As a general theorist of power, Spinoza is highly idiosyncratic and challenging. Following him in his particular configuration of the concept of power means to leave behind the common understanding of power as an action-theoretical category. Insisting on power as a constitutive entity, highlighting its inter- or transindividual, radically relational nature and arguing for its ambivalence (or double-sidedness) indeed means opposing many contemporary conceptualizations. Methodologically speaking, his social and his political theory is not only informed but deeply shaped by his ontological outlook; it can be understood as nothing less than a general social or political ontology.

A social theory of affections

Implied in this fundamental, categorical thinking of power is a vision of society as a space of power where different capacities and forces building on this infrastructure of power encounter each other, interact and intersect, where social patterns and orders feeding off it emerge, sustain themselves or wither away again. This is what constitutes the forceful, powerful, dynamic "life" of society, expressing a multiplicity of forces on different levels and enabling or disabling specific life-forms, individual and collective, among and between them. The next crucial step is to elaborate on Spinoza's vision of the social in terms of affective structures and relationships.[7]

Affectation

On the most general, ontological level referred to previously, the basic entity can be called "affect" in the rather technical sense Spinoza introduces. "Affections" are the (modal) expressions of the universal, singular substance Spinoza famously calls God or (the whole of) nature, and the affections of these modes effect changes or alterations modifying the singular natures and essences by transforming their individual power to be and to act. Speaking of human beings, in particular, affects are by definition "affections of the body" and likewise "ideas of these affections" (Spinoza 1994: 104). Whatever happens to human beings in society is of this nature: It is an affection on the bodily, material level and on the psycho-mental level; it happens to the body and its mind alike.

"Affection" and "affect" are that fundamental because they describe – in this generality – all that can happen to human and nonhuman entities, because affection or change is what characterizes that something happens at all. If nothing changes, nothing happens. Action or interaction are, ontologically speaking, happenings, changes on and in the one acted upon or acting on or with another. Power or

potentia, in the ontological sense discussed in the last section, refers to the capacity or potentiality of acting and being acted-upon that characterizes individual entities (like human beings, composed of bodily and mental capacities). "Affect" is the name for the fact that these interactions actually change something and that this change is registered objectively as a modification in the power to act or to be acted upon and subjectively as a specific affective or emotional experience.[8]

In a radically processualist fashion we might say that, in their essence or nature, individual entities are nothing else than the sum or ensemble of their capacities (that we might call their *potentia*, their power). This can be translated as the sum of capacities of their affections in their active and passive modality, the possibilities of affecting and being affected. Again, this is an ontological way of speaking, claiming that it is a fundamental feature of specific beings that they are what they can do and what can be done to them. Indeed, Spinoza's concept of being or being as *potentia* can be explained as the many possible affections of that being.[9]

The social then is the horizon or dimension of these affections of and on singular human beings in the context of other human (and nonhuman) beings. Two characteristics of this radical dynamic view seem particularly noteworthy. First, it is clear that this conception leaves equal room for active and passive determinations; as a person you are not only characterized by what you can do but also by what can be done to you, by your vulnerability, passivity and transformability as much as by your power to act, your agency. Second, body and mind can both be accounted for as separate registers or dimensions of the same entity. In this sense, this conception is technically speaking monist but allows for a version of perspectival dualism. Affections work on both the bodily and the mental level, they are expressions of a bodily change and a mental occurrence, say, a movement and a thought. These are not the same, but they happen, as it were, to the same thing or being. A social theory working from these premises, therefore, is neither committed to prioritizing activity over passivity or process over structure, nor to reducing all social interaction to either intentional will or bodily causality. Rather, it offers a general framework with affections as its basic dimension, placing all elements and events within the social as complex occurrences of affect in its active or passive, mental or bodily modality.[10]

Transformation

If affects or singular instances of affectations are the basic elements of social processes, the theoretical emphasis shifts from entity or being to process and relation. In this framework it becomes less important to say what a thing is than what it can do. Not knowing "what the body can do" (Spinoza 1994: 155), as Spinoza confesses at the beginning of the third part of the *Ethics*, means not yet knowing what a body is, since it is nothing apart from what it can do. What it can do is express substance and change, alter or modify other modes (or itself). The power or *potentia* that can be attributed to something is its effective or transformative power. We might also say: Power *is* transformation. But this also means that power is the capacity of a being to affect and transform others and itself or to bring itself into

a relation that will affect and transform itself. There is no way to account for or describe individual powers apart from this potential affective or transformative relation to others as objects or agents of affective interaction. A social theory built on these premises will, therefore, be a social theory of radical affective relationality, or rather, it will think sociality itself as affective relationality.[11]

   This shift from identity to process and relation leads to a particular sensibility to the links, connections and assemblages enabled or disabled in and by the social. Spinoza himself was posing these questions mainly in the language of simple and composite bodies, a question from earlier ontological debates on simple elements in Cartesianism but dating back much further to the age-old controversy between atomists and non-atomists. These questions about the reality of the artificial nature of collective, composite beings for Spinoza became most pressing in the context of politics and the question of the state and the people. How can it be that the many act as a singular entity, are directed by collective intentions or desires, and that they are responsive to the same patterns of fear, hope or despair? Behind these rather specific questions lies the problem of an ontology of collective beings, and it is here where a (Neo-)Spinozist promises to give a "transindividualist", even "connectivist" story. The very source and locus of formation and transformation of individual bodies are the (quality and structure of) social processes themselves; individual bodies are shaped and forged in affective interaction with others. Social reality is affective relationality that never stops transforming all of its elements.

Transmission

In such a perspective, the affects – first – form the objects of social inquiry, but they are no simple basic or individual elements; they are – second – in themselves variable, moving and connectable objects that shift from one scale and level to another. Moreover, they are characterized by an internal dynamic that explains their movement and their seeking connections and assemblages.[12] The terms "affect" and "affection", therefore, not only refer to specific objects but also to the laws and patterns ruling their interaction and transformation. Remember the third dimension of Spinoza's conception of power highlighted previously and the dynamics of accumulation inherent in any specific *potentia* that seeks self-preservation and energetic self-assertion. Concerning the affects, in particular, Spinoza tries to assess and analyze the affective patterns in which a being tries to preserve itself in an emotional economy of interaction and evaluation. The basic ideas are simple and seem to follow insights from psychological common-sense: human beings evade what hurts or harms them, and they go after what does them well; their affective reactions tend to assimilate new experiences to former ones; similarities and likenesses can trick people into expectations based on former experiences and judgments. In addition, the influence of others is crucial: we like what the others like, and we like the others who like what we like. Similar patterns hold true for hate or fear; and things can become complicated and ambivalent in cases of jealousy and rivalry.[13]

In this way, the affects of another can inform and infect my own affects. Affects are contagious and transmittable, since their objects can switch places and valences, and there can be subtle and manipulative interventions into the affective economies by social forces that regulate and govern the very realm of choices and evaluations, simply in function of their capacities to affect the affections of others, that is, their power. Therefore, a social theory built on such a dynamic picture of the ever-changing landscape of affect offers a politicized view of the emotional life of subjects, since the very form their individual affects can take is the product or effect of a certain social distribution of capacities – that is, of a political distribution of power. Such a theory of the social will accept the political dimension in all of its domains or spheres since the force and power to effectively affect and to be affected is what explains the very affect that can effectively take place and flourish in a given context.[14]

In all three elements of such a social theory of affects (regarding its objects, the essential relations between these objects and the laws and patterns regulating them), there is a rather blunt materialist tendency, but not in the sense of an opposition to the symbolic or discursive. Rather, Spinoza and the (Neo-)Spinozists think that the patterns of subjective experience and social interactions reside in the real, material setup of societies. What can be lived and experienced in a given society is dependent on the very forces and powers in effect in it, on the material distribution of affective capacities and real possibilities of subjects, groups and institutions to act and be acted upon, that is, to be in a certain way.

(Neo-)Spinozism and/as critical theory

It seems obvious that such an approach, taking the form of a social or political ontology or a general social theory of affects, differs in scope and ambition from many other conceptions and that its relation to normative or critical theories attempting to evaluate and criticize current social arrangements is far from clear. Let me offer three short cues for an argument that such a theory – even if in itself it may not be critical – is strongly inclined to describe the social in a way that invites transformation, and this might just be the minimal criterion for the critical nature of a theory: It offers a theoretical perspective to describe, analyze and understand situations of domination and unfreedom and offers ways to imagine practical ways of overcoming them. In three ways, a (Neo-)Spinozist framework might be read as a version of critical theory thus understood, albeit in an unexpected, ontological form.

Conditions of existence

The outlook implied in this theory is organized around the distinction between possible and impossible movements and actions within given forms of life and institutional arrangements. It searches for the factors that make self-preservation and the realization of one's powers more or less probable, more or less sustainable, more or less livable. Therefore, on the methodological level, it is a theory

of conditions in the broadest sense. It searches for the conditions of existence of individual and collective life, of community and democracy. This categorical, ontological inquiry – into what is socially (made) possible and impossible, and why – is a necessary precondition for questions about what community or politics we might want, prefer or desire, but these questions have to refer back to the material or real basis in the conditions effectively governing the social in a given context (cf. Saar 2018).

Such an analysis can, therefore, form the first step of a critical theory of the differentiated, highly stratified conditions of the socially possible and impossible.[15] (Neo-)Spinozism asks about who and what can live, survive and flourish under given social conditions – that is, under a certain distribution of powers, capacities, means and resources. It should be clear that the possible here is not already playing the role of a full-blown normative criterion; rather, it is the register in which all descriptions and explications of social phenomena, situations and entities function. The (Neo-)Spinozist perspective reads, as it were, the social as a space of the possible or impossible, in other words, as a site of *potentia*, or power. It is from here that the analysis starts, and it proceeds by imagining and testing other possibilities and impossibilities.

Immanent life

If possible and impossible life (both individual and collective, mental and bodily) are in the focus of such a theory, it itself takes, we might say, the point of view of life.[16] It takes the flourishing and expanding of vital powers as its point of reference. If there is a strong ethical or normative commitment in this perspective, it is the core notion of a life capable of sustaining or preserving itself and interacting with other instances or forms of life in order to ensure and expend its power to exist. The political, evaluative perspective, therefore, shifts from identity, rights and status to survival and modes of existence, to ecology in the broadest sense: How can different forms of life live together or co-exist in a productive way? Which institutional forms enable the realization of the powers of the many, and which monopolize and narrow the circulation and communication of power (cf. Balibar 1998)?

The promise of the (Neo-)Spinozist perspective, therefore, consists of proceeding from an immanent point of view on all of these political, social and ethical questions.[17] This means it starts from the very capacities and possibilities (i.e., the *potentia*) of the manifold entities or beings in question themselves, and from nothing and nowhere else. And it is not mere individual strength or pure individual power of any single being or any powerful sub-group of a society that will win the day. It is, rather, a question of equilibria, co-existences and balances of power and life. Thus, from such a point of view, one asks for collective forms of life in which the power and the right of lives within themselves and next to themselves can endure. Treating this as a question of life itself, and not as a question of norms or laws governing life, means that there is no higher or transcendent instance from which to judge or impose norms. Any political, social or ethical normativity will

have to be immanent to the forms of life embodying it. There is, in other words, room for an immanentist and critical vitalism.[18]

Radical enlightenment

This story about the conditions and possibilities of life includes the assumption of a strong link between theory (or philosophy or reflection) and practice (or action or experience). Knowing and assessing the conditions that govern life strengthens or weakens the sustainability of the latter. And knowing one's own limitations and possibilities is, in Spinoza's eyes, a necessary step on the path to freedom. Knowing what binds you, helps you see both the necessities and, not yet unbound, possibilities of acting. Acquiring greater knowledge, making more experiences, learning from failures and successes, growing from being the subject of and subject to ever more affections is nothing external to but immanent in the process of life itself. A knowing, living subject will incorporate everything it learns into its form of life and profile of capacities. In this sense, the connection between knowledge and power (as *potentia agendi*) is almost immediate.[19] Such a rationalist perspective is classically called "enlightenment", an attitude that demands to know more and to have the courage to know because a certain critical knowledge can be one step toward liberation.

   Critical Theory in all of its senses has a been an heir to this imperative, claiming that an intimate link between theory and practice is a necessary consequence from the fact that theory (or knowledge) is itself part of the social totality and implicated in its structures of domination and hierarchical social practices. Knowing these structures and practices contributes to a form of counter-knowledge that gains practical, existential relevance for those subjected to them, and it leads, naturally, as it were, to a certain form of practice or resistance; such theoretical "work" therefore "is a moment in the continuous transformation and development of the material foundations" of the society in question (Horkheimer 1986: 194). While obviously belonging to a new materialist tendency to focus on bodies, the nonhuman and the nonrational, a certain Spinozism, as I have tried to argue, also converges with this program in the ambition to articulate an inherently critical theory from a rather different and maybe unexpected angle. Thinking society through the power, affects and life of its subjects means thinking society critically.

Notes

 1 For references and interpretations cf. Deleuze 1988; Negri 1991; Terpstra 1994; Gatens 2009.
 2 Cf. Spinoza 1994, 103–9 (propositions 28–36 of part I of the *Ethics*).

3   For more substantial discussions of Spinoza's theory of democratic politics cf. Walther 1993; Gatens and Lloyd 1999; James 2008; Saar 2014, 2015a.

4   Cf. the relevant passages in the *Tractatus politicus* (Spinoza 2002: 687, 690, 691, 692). Helpful discussions of this formula are provided by Balibar 2001; Hindrichs 2006.

5   Cf. for this topos Balibar 1997, 2018.

6   The extensive debate on power is mapped by Wartenberg 1990; Allen 1999. My own view can be found in Saar 2013, ch. IV.

7   Lordon 2013; Steinberg 2018 provide authoritative reconstructions of Spinoza's conception of affect in its political significance.

8   For more extensive discussions of Spinoza's general theory of affect cf. Deleuze 1988; Saar 2013: ch. VI and, 2015b.

9   Cf. Kwek 2015; Andermann 2020: pt. II for acute formulations of this ontological core of Spinoza's theory of affects.

10 Many contemporary interpreters assert that this perspective evades traditional humanist assumptions about what it means to be a person, as does Hasana Sharp in her powerful argument for Spinoza's "anti-anthropocentrism" (Sharp 2011: 9).

11 This of course is a theoretical element (Neo-)Spinozism shares with many other late modern social theories, e.g. with interactionism, social constructionism, systems theory, most of poststructuralist and differentialist sociologies, Karen Barad's and Bruno Latour's neo-ontologies, probably even resonance theory.

12 These questions have become prominent in current social-theoretical thinking about affect, cf. Ahmed 2004; Reckwitz 2012; Seyfert 2012; Mühlhoff 2018 for brilliant examples.

13 These psychological observations, rules of thumb and general maxims about what to expect from the human mind in the grip of powerful passions take up most of part III of the *Ethics* (Spinoza 1994: 160–87), following the first 10 more general ontological propositions and preceding a catalogue of 43 specific human affects.

14 This emphasis places (Neo-)Spinozism firmly at the side of authors following the "affective turn" (Clough et al. 2007; cf. the most recent synthesis of von Scheve and Slaby 2019).

15 For perspectives on Spinoza as an analyst of class domination, cf. Terpstra 1993; Lordon 2014.

16 For a comparable approach to the question of (im)possible lives in contemporary societies that is close to a certain heritage of Critical Theory, cf. Butler 2009.

17 For perspectives on what a contemporary philosophy of immanence could be, cf. Rölli 2018; Skeaff 2018; Andermann 2020; Saar 2013: conclusion; Saar 2020.

18 For related perspectives on philosophies of life in close proximity to some of these ideas cf. Sharp and Taylor 2016; Delitz, Nungesser and Seyfert 2018. For more on "critical vitalism" cf. Worms 2015 and the contribution by Heike Delitz to this volume.

19 For an extensive argument to this effect and a useful comparison with Marx, cf. Reitter 2011.

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7   Transindividuality

The affective continuity of the
social in Spinoza

Kerstin Andermann

For some time now, a paradigmatic shift has been taking place under the banner of *new materialisms*, in the course of which social and cultural theory has increasingly turned toward materiality (cf. Coole and Frost 2010; Ellenzweig and Zammito 2017). This shift amounts to nothing less than a historic reorientation of the metaphysical foundations of the human sciences, since it aims to de-hierarchize the position of the human individual and address the latter in terms of the constitutive conditions of existence as part of a horizontal turn. At issue here is the question of the existential relationship between individuals, as well as the importance of ontological questions concerning the singularity and independence of individuals for critical social theory. The condition of this singularity and independence is a classical metaphysical problem and one that is closely tied to the ontological concept of substance.[1] For Plato, *ousia* – that is, that which comes to be termed *substantia* or *essentia* in Latin – is understood as unconditional and independent, while for Aristotle it is already an internally differentiated unity that has to be thought as in the world, within an order with other things – that is, in a constitutive relation to those things. Multiplicity and becoming are rooted here in the unity of being, so that the Aristotelian distinction between substance, accident and relation already departs from the rejection of the idea of an essence of being as an unconditioned and independent substance (cf. Stegmaier 1977). Nevertheless, Aristotle's conception ultimately continues to be oriented toward the "being-in-itself" of things and to elevate substance above its relations (or its "being-for-others"). This privileging of substance above its relations leads to the notion of an indivisible thing-like singularity, which is designated by the term "individual".

The notion of "transindividuality", by contrast, is intended to highlight the blurring of the boundaries of the individual and cannot therefore presuppose the subjective unity of the human individual. It is rather a question of thinking individuals in terms of their constitutive relations and as temporary and singular events of a particular duration, since this is the only way to bring to light the fundamental heteronomy underlying each human individual. In contrast to what is suggested by the concept of in-dividuality, dividuality is, so to say, the "normal state" of human existence: not only does our natality constitute a first form of participation and a fundamental condition of our division, our spatial connection to a particular place and our belonging to a particular historical time are also basic conditions

of our dividuality. Following Nietzsche, we might also argue that morality is a form of self-division. As he remarks: "In morality, man treats himself not as an 'individuum' but as a 'dividuum'" (Nietzsche 1986). Dividuality is then not only a material condition of human existence; indeed, what makes the idea of transindividuality so inspiring is precisely the continuity of a transcendental field without specific individuality. We are then dealing here with supra-individual effects within the fields of thought and extension, which give rise to a relational concept of individuality that emphasizes the transindividual preconditions of social life rather than reducing them to a supposedly undivided origin.

Nevertheless, the concept of transindividuality not only has a dividualistic dimension but also an anti-individualistic, since if we are to understand the constitutive conditions of the social sphere, we have to take into account the relational structure of the reality inhabited by all individuals. In a dividualistic perspective transindividuality refers to anthropological assumptions while the anti-individualistic dimension is only a question of a relational ontology. Our understanding of transindividuality should not be articulated in purely anthropological terms; the value of the concept is precisely that it does not respond to the question of the human with an anthropology, but rather with a metaphysics that excludes any scientistic presuppositions from its model of individuation. This relational conception of transindividuality confronts us with the modern withdrawal of the transcendental, rational subject from the determining context of nature, and this is precisely why metaphysics and the structural ontological model of Spinoza's early modern philosophy is so important to it.

Spinoza on immanent affections

In the history of philosophy, we can trace back the emergence of a notion of transindividuality to Spinoza, who opened his magnum opus, *Ethics*, with a metaphysical explication of the elementary dimensions of reality and a definition of an essence (*essentia*) that is the cause and precondition of itself and that involves its own existence (*existentia*) (cf. Spinoza 2002). Against the background of this ontological immanence, Spinoza can interpret the entire existence as constituted in accordance with its own conditions and as a form of immanent causality (*causa immanens*), in which individuals come to be constituted via diverse relationships. Spinoza provides an immanent justification of his basic ontological concept, which is rooted in the self-caused unity of a single substance containing diverse internal differentiations. Setting out from the immanence of this unconditioned substance, he not only radically rejects all forms of transcendent derivation; he also calls into question transcendental forms of constitution and thus every vertical distinction between the Cartesian spheres of thought and extension. For Spinoza, the assumption of a fundamental unity of a single substance is important in order to understand reality in its immanent totality and to derive the individuation of singular things from a metaphysical model of the whole. In his structural ontological model of substance, attributes and modes, the modes are a point of transition from the substance of the whole to individual things and are described

as affections of substance: "By mode I mean the affections of substance, that is, that which is in something else and is conceived through something else" (Spinoza 2002: 217 [E1d5]). In defining modes in this way, Spinoza emphasizes the ontological character of the process of affection, for it is only through affections that modes come to be individualized as singular things within the substance of the whole. To this extent, the concept of affection is to be understood in its fundamental ontological and epistemological relevance for the philosophical system Spinoza left behind, which continues to exert a significant influence on contemporary socio-theoretical debates.

The derivations of the verb *afficio* (which, as the Latin version of the Greek *pathos*, encompasses all that could befall a being) play a crucial role here, and Spinoza makes full use of the broad semantic field of the concept of the affect. While the term "affect" (*affectus*) refers in a narrow sense to the emotions catalogued by Spinoza at the end of the third part of the *Ethics*, the term "affection" (*affectio*) denotes a broader process of reference and a causal relationship between individuals. Affections therefore serve to constitute individual things, and it is through different affections that individual things come to be constituted in very different ways. The concept of constitution (*constitutio*) refers here not only to the general process in which bodies affect one another but also to the specific constitution and state of an affected body and its ideas. Affections are also important in the epistemological context, since they constitute the conditions of possibility of the movement and rest of bodies, whose affection gives rise to the ideas of the intellect. For Spinoza it is clear that it is the affection of the body that leads to the ideas of the intellect, and that the first object of an intellectual idea is always the body in its affective relations. An affection is then an effect that increases or diminishes the power of the intellect by increasing or diminishing the power of the body. It thus becomes clear that Spinoza considers the affections of the body and the intellect to have an equiprimordial relationship. What we see here is a constitutive heteronomy that determines every individual body – that is, the multiplicity of external impulses that make up the constitution of any individual. For Spinoza, affecting and being affected is not only a possibility for the human individual but a necessary principle of its self-preservation.

It is only if we attend to the distinction between *affectio* and *affectus* that it becomes clear that affects are not simply states that feel a certain way and exhibit an identifiable intentional content. Affects are rather to be understood as increases or diminutions in one's power of activity and thus not as true or false, good or bad, but rather simply as gradated levels of individual power. They should not then be classified according to typologically fixed determinations, but must be conceived in terms of causal interactions. The differential chain of affections transcends individuals, and existence as a whole has to be exhibited in terms of an affective continuity in which individuals are not understood as isolated entities, but rather as emerging from transindividual affective relationships. From this perspective, individuation occurs through the affections that traverse individuals and that serve to increase or decrease their potentiality. What is decisive here is that this differentially determined existential field is not teleologically or finalistically

oriented toward higher aims or ideas, but rather by the causal effects that occur between individuals and establish connections between them.

Transindividuality in Deleuze

On the basis of Spinoza's account of immanent self-causation, Gilles Deleuze examines such affective connections in terms of pre-individual causal relations. Deleuze's conception of affect goes beyond an intentional or transcendental conception of experience and invokes an ontological form of affection in order to explore the potential of transindividual individuation. As he writes,

> from one state to another, . . . there are transitions, passages that are experienced, durations through which we pass to a greater or a lesser perfection. Furthermore, these states, these affections, images or ideas are not separable from the duration that attaches them to the preceding state and makes them tend toward the next state.
>
> (Deleuze 1988: 48–9)

Individuals can then be understood as certain durations that link back to a prior state and extend toward a succeeding state. For Deleuze, dealing with affections depends on a practical faculty that he calls the ability to be affected (*pouvoir d'être affecté*). The essence of an individual can then be understood as a variable ability to affect and be affected, and insofar as any individual exists within this field of affections, it is always already related to other individuals.

> An effect is first of all the trace of one body upon another, the state of a body insofar as it suffers the action of another body. It is an *affectio* – for example, the effect of the sun on our body, which "indicates" the nature of the affected body and merely "envelops" the nature of the affecting body.
>
> (Deleuze 1998: 138; emphasis as in original)

Deleuze's revaluation of affects as affections on the basis of an immanent theory of causality makes clear that individuals are not to be essentialized on the basis of fixed determinations, but rather have to be understood as causally dependent on transindividual, affective processes. For Deleuze, then, the individual is not that which is indivisible but rather that which constantly divides itself and changes its state.

Transindividuality is therefore to be understood here as the continual transference of effects between individuals that are externally related to one another and entangled by each other. It affects both thought, which necessarily takes place as the incursion of something external, and extended bodies, which are to be conceived in terms of their dynamic, constitutive relations. Deleuze writes:

> A body, of whatever kind, is defined by Spinoza in two simultaneous ways. In the first place, a body . . . is composed of an infinite number of particles; it is

the relations of motion and rest, of speeds and slownesses between particles, that define a body, the individuality of a body. Secondly, a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality.

(Deleuze 1988: 123)

Deleuze expands this conception of individuation to include those dynamics that operate below the level of any actualized qualities and elucidates the chains of effects within the fields of extension and thought that can continually absorb new impulses and recreate themselves. As Deleuze states:

Individuation is mobile, strangely supple, fortuitous and endowed with fringes and margins; all because the intensities which contribute to it communicate with each other, envelop other intensities and are in turn enveloped. The individual is far from indivisible, never ceasing to divide and change its nature.

(Deleuze 1994: 257)

From this perspective, in which the individual is continually reconstituted through immanent causal relations, we can no longer speak of the individual's in-dividuality. What we are instead confronted with are dynamic relationships in which individuals are linked in different ways. This immanent transindividual perspective offers insights into the constitution of both simple and complex individuals, while also making it possible to understand institutions and communities on the basis of their immanent associative principles.

Transindividuality in Balibar

Like Deleuze, Étienne Balibar has also made a significant contribution to the debate on individuality as transindividuality by drawing on Spinoza. For Balibar, too, the problem of individuality extends from the ontological to the political domain. He puts forward a relational ontology as the basis of a "general theory of communication" from which the transindividual forms of individual life in social and political structures can be derived (Balibar 1997: 7ff.; Balibar 2018; Read 2016). For Balibar, individuality is a form of actualized existence within an immanent context that does not precede individuals as their foundation, but is rather actualized through them. To this extent, an individual is always an assemblage of many parts, rather than a completed, singular form, and is not teleologically oriented toward a particular final form: "Each man, each individual, as such singular, is always both similar and dissimilar to himself and to others, and his subjective isolation is only a fiction" (Balibar 1994: 26). For Balibar, then, individuals are open-ended units and there can be no singular individuals in a substantial sense that do not dynamically relate to other individuals and actualize themselves through these relations. The singularity of an individual is therefore not to be sought in the individual itself, but in the constitutive relations from which it

arises. For Balibar, transindividuality is therefore the condition of possibility of individuality and is based on a general logical schema of causality – that is, on immanent cause-effect relationships. This schema is described as nonlinear and non-determined: it arises on the basis of contingent interactions and can therefore continually give rise to new orders of things (cf. 1997: 13). The fundamental condition of existing individuals is then already a transindividual condition, since an existing individual arises through external causes within the field of immanence and can itself become such a cause. This relationship between activity and passivity forms the basis of the existence of any individual, and we might even say that individuals *are* this reversible relationship between activity and passivity. As Balibar writes:

> This object is not the individual but individuality or, better, the form of individuality: how it is constituted, how it tries to preserve its own form, how it is composed with others according to relations of agreement and disagreement or of activity and passivity.
>
> (Balibar 1994: 26)

In a fundamental sense, then, individuality is already transindividuality, since in order to preserve itself, it always requires more than itself.

In his conception of individuality, Balibar distinguishes between two orders of integration. The first is a basic causal order in which an individual proves always to be an assemblage of diverse individuals and to need many other individuals to ensure its own self-preservation. In the second order, it becomes clear that our transindividually conditioned reality is not only the reality of a body susceptible to affection but above all of thought susceptible to affection. Thought is embedded in a totality that it discloses on the basis of shared, integrative concepts (*notiones communes*), which function as conceptual and intellectual institutions for the integration of individuals into transindividual contexts. Transindividuality is then both a material practice of affection and an ideal, epistemological practice, for it is knowledge above all that is established on the basis of a continuity that allows the individual to situate itself within a causal network. In both of these orders, transindividuality can be considered a process of constituting individuals from the outside and as an ongoing process of decomposition and recomposition:

> Any individual's conservation (or stability, therefore identity) must be compatible with a "continuous regeneration" of its constituent parts, i.e., what in modern terms we would call a regulated inward and outward flow, or material exchange with other individuals. . . . An isolated individual, having no "exchanges" with the environment, would not be regenerated, therefore it would not exist.
>
> (Balibar 1997: 18)

Balibar also applies these ontological principles to social and political questions, and it is in examining real transindividual processes of community formation

that he addresses affective relationships between individuals. Community formation takes place here through affective and imaginative communication, which is itself to be understood as a political praxis (cf. Balibar 2008: 95ff.). On this basis, Balibar conceives the founding of societies through affective and imaginative processes of transindividual community formation as a "form of the genesis (or 'production') of society, which springs from the passions themselves and which is worked out in them and through them, even if . . . the result is not necessarily a harmonious society" (2008: 85).

A key precondition of such community formation is the mimetic functioning of affects and imagination, since other individuals are also constituted through processes of imaginative identification and the imitation of affects. As Balibar puts it:

> Our "fellow man" – that other individual with whom we can identify, towards whom we have "altruistic" feelings, whom religion refers to as our "neighbour" and politics as our "fellow citizen" – does not exist as such naturally, in the sense of a being who is simply there, who is given. Rather, he is constituted by a process of imaginary identification, which Spinoza calls the "imitation of the affects".
>
> (Balibar 2008: 87)

The process of affection therefore goes hand in hand with imagination – that is, mental images, memories, associations – since affections are always bound up with ideas of affections.

Imagination is then not only essential at the epistemological level but also at the socio-theoretical level, since it consists of ideas of those entities that connect individuals, such as shared institutions, values, images and so on (cf. also Gatens and Lloyd 1999). A transindividual account of the social must then take into account the imaginary openness of human individuals if it is to illuminate affectively shaped processes of transindividual community formation. In this way, we can also gain an insight into those social structures that arise through the free and innovative circulation of affects. The basis of affective relations is the mimetic chain that runs from one individual to the next and through all individuals. These relations are by no means always elements of consciousness; they rather produce conscious effects that are always based on only partial knowledge of the relevant causal relationships (cf. Balibar 1994: 26). The social sphere is then held together by mimetic chains rooted in the similarity between individuals:

> What is there that is common to the two ideas of sociability – the natural and the institutional – beyond any differences of anthropological orientation? Perhaps it is the assumption that sociability is a bond which "unites" men, expressing their reciprocal need or their "friendship" . . . and that society is the order through which they live out this bond made good.
>
> (Balibar 2008: 77–8)

We might go as far as to say that the mimetic chain or the social bond prevent individuals from taking on a fixed form or from being anything other than elements of superordinate context or of an "affective network cutting across each individual" (Balibar 1994: 28).

Immanent social theory

The fundamental question of whether and in what sense any being can be thought as singular and independent is then of some importance for our understanding of individuality and transindividuality. It is therefore crucial to ontologically determine the extent to which individuals can be conceived as singular in a substantial sense or as relational and how they are constituted in relation to the things that surround them. Against this background, the process of affection takes on an ontological dimension and goes far beyond a purely aesthetic or phenomenological problem. This also means that transindividuality should not only be addressed in terms of a subjective experience that would always already presuppose the human individual, but also on the basis of an ontological model of reality. Following Spinoza, Deleuze addresses this reality primarily as a problem of the empirico-transcendental constitution of the individual. Balibar, by contrast, turns toward the social and political and shows that an ontological treatment of transindividuality is important not only where simple individuals are concerned but also with respect to complex individuals. Affective processes take place at all levels in proportion to the simplicity or complexity of individuals, which are integrated into a wide range of contexts such as those of the family, society and the state, which can be also understood as individuals. It is on this basis that Deleuze conceives society as a state of affairs, "in which a group of men compound their respective powers so as to form a more powerful whole" (1988: 107), and sees in such community formation processes the possibility of establishing new relationships through an individual's associative links with others, while maintaining his or her specific differences:

> But now it is a question of knowing whether relations (and which ones?) can compound directly to form a new, more "extensive" relation, or whether capacities can compound directly to constitute a more "intense" capacity or power. . . . How do individuals enter into a composition with one another in order to form a higher individual, *ad infinitum*.
>
> (Deleuze 1988: 126)

The orientation of metaphysical thinking toward socio-theoretical thinking in both Deleuze and Balibar can be traced back to the close connection between metaphysics and politics in Spinoza (cf. also Negri 1991: 221; Negri 2004 and Warren Montag's preface to Balibar 2008: VII–XIX). On the basis of an ontological conception of transindividuality, it is then possible to elucidate intensive, event-like processes of individuation and to explore the transindividual constitution of the

social with respect to its internal differentiation and the differential potentiality of its constitutive acts.

Examples of transindividual continuity

By way of a conclusion, I would like to discuss two examples of the transindividual dimensions of social reality. The first is that of the figure who transitions between classes, as presented in Didier Eribon's auto-sociobiographical study and as discussed by Chantal Jaquet under the conceptual heading of the non-reproduction of social power (cf. Eribon 2010; Jaquet 2014). In opposition to the classical theory of the reproduction of social inequality, Jaquet invokes the term *transclasse* and characterizes the non-reproduction of social power in terms of a transitional existence between class identities. She calls into question the possibility of a transition from one's original milieu to another social milieu and describes the enduringly ambivalent and heteronomous condition of an existence in-between social worlds. She also elucidates the categories of profession, education, sexuality, religion and so on as affective and imaginative links within different social milieus and analyzes the condition of a multiple individuality located in the interstitial space between an origin and a present form of existence. The concept of transindividuality marks the specific constitution of such an existence between classes and makes it possible to conceive this divided mode of existence in terms of an increase in reflexivity and agency, thereby bringing to light the gradated autonomy of the individual who transitions between classes and even the benefits of such a class transition.

The concept of transindividuality thus marks an inner difference that lies behind any actualized individuality, and this structure of the inner differentiation of the social is also evident in my second example from the field of social theory. This concerns forms of invective degradation, which are not to be seen as pure negations but rather have to be elucidated in terms of their inner differences and thus their potentiality. From the perspective of the transindividual constitution of individuals and their affective and imaginative entanglement, degradation can be understood both as a passion (*passio*) and as an action (*actio*). It manifests itself in a differential structure that may destabilize and inhibit power or stabilize and increase power. Degradation reduces the power of the one who is debased and increases the power of the one who does the debasing. In the interplay of such forces, it is by no means always clear who is the subject and who is the object, who is active and who is passive, whose position is stabilized and whose is destabilized. The inhibition of the power of one party can increase the power of others and it is in this differential structure that the transindividual character of degradation manifests itself.

As in the case of class transition, disparagement should not merely be conceived as a negation. Here it is rather a question of a differential processuality within the transindividual field of the social and of making clear that individuals may at the same time be both the subject and the object of the affective activity that traverses them. This differential structure gives rise to a space of possibility

that may continually exceed an individual's given reality. In order to grasp the complexity of the social, it is therefore necessary to reveal the internal differences of individuation in its ontological structure and to place these on a transindividual foundation. Here it is not just a question of human individuals, but rather of the affective and imaginative sphere of the social as a transindividual unity. In this way, it is possible to revise our conception of a wide range of dimensions of social life. Philosophy is in a position here to critically re-evaluate the ontological foundations of the social field in order to facilitate a realistic examination of the individual's causal positioning within it.

Note

1 The *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* provides a reconstruction of the concepts of the individual and individuality. For a treatment of the numerous metaphysical problems linked to the concept of individuation, see Lukasiewicz, Anscombe and Popper (1953). On the problem of individuality in the metaphysical systems of the early modern era, see Thiel (1997) and Balibar (1996: 215–41). Gerhardt (2000) also gives a discussion of the wide-ranging significance of the metaphysical unity of individuality for a theory of the human.

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8   The paradox of capacity and the power of beauty[*]

Christoph Menke

When Michel Foucault, 200 years after Kant, took up the question of what is Enlightenment, his answer, echoing but also significantly changing Horkheimer's and Adorno's, was that, rather than the outline of a project that should and could be realized, Enlightenment is a form of thinking and acting that is haunted by a paradox. Enlightenment is the name of a paradoxical structure. Foucault calls it "the paradox of the relations of capacity and power" (Foucault 2003: 55). On the one hand, capacity is the fundamental concept and central goal of Enlightenment. To acquire capacities means to become a subject, and to become capable and hence a subject means to become autonomous. For to possess a capacity means being able to rule oneself in such a way that one carries out a practical performance successfully. The acquisition of capacity is the acquisition of autonomy. This belief in "the simultaneous and proportional growth" of capacity and freedom is the determining principle that "throughout the entire history of Western societies" has constituted "the root of their singular historical destiny" (ibid.). At the same time, this utterly fundamental belief – the belief which grounds our existence – is wrecked by the suspicion that the "relations between the growth of capacities and the growth of autonomy are not as simple" (ibid.). This is the suspicion that capacities that according to the Enlightenment *define* subjectivity actually remain external, even heterogeneous, to it. For while capacity on the one hand is meant to define the form of positive freedom, as autonomy, it at the same time stands in an indissoluble relation to (what Foucault calls) "power". This relation of capacity to power *is* the paradox of capacity. The paradox of capacity consists in – nothing but – the fact that its relation to power is indissoluble: in that capacity, the autonomy of the subject is internally defined by its relation to power.

   In the following, I want to explore this claim from an aesthetic perspective. I want to look at how the paradox of capacity is dealt with in the discourse of aesthetics, the modern theory of the aesthetic. For aesthetics is a "second reflection" (Adorno) of Enlightenment: here, in aesthetics, the fundamental categories of Enlightenment – capacity, power, subjectivity, freedom – are reflected, that is, problematized, a second time. Aesthetics is thereby nothing less than a critical ontology of modernity. For it is in the aesthetic domain of semblance that the being of capacity appears. But it appears here, from the beginning and throughout,

in a double, even contradictory way. Aesthetics, as theory and praxis, is the field of a struggle over what capacities (that is to say, subjects) are. In this struggle, the one party sees in the aesthetic the dissolution of the paradox of capacity, while the other party sees in it the enactment and intensification of the paradox that defines the relation between capacity and power – for in the medium of the aesthetic, the concept and experience of power acquire a new meaning.

The promise of beauty

The modern discourse of aesthetics begins with a radically new interpretation of beauty. In the Greek or Christian tradition beauty was regarded as the sensuous presence of the super-sensuous; beauty leads us out of the finite world. It is the medium of transcendence. Modern aesthetics, on the other hand, affirms *this* world. The basic formula of this new, "aesthetic" interpretation of beauty is Stendhal's expression: "Beauty is only a promise of happiness" (Stendhal 1915: 56). And "only" (*n'est que*) here means nothing but or *merely* this: a promise of *our* happiness, of some achievement or fulfillment that is possible for us. A closer examination of this notion leads us to the first of the two contending parties in the aesthetic struggle regarding the being of capacity. For reasons that will become clear in the next step, I shall refer to this first approach as "bourgeois aesthetics".

Stendhal's formulation is actually a quotation. He takes over this fundamental interpretation of beauty from Hobbes, the "first theorist of modern society" (Dieter Henrich 1972: 102). In *De Homine* and then again in *Leviathan*, Hobbes tells us that the Latin word for beauty, namely *pulchrum*, "signifies that, which by some apparent signes promiseth Good". Indeed all, or at least many, of the words that we use to offer aesthetic praise (such as splendid, graceful, attractive) "signifie nothing els, but the Mine or Countenance, which promiseth Good". Hobbes further defines: "Good in the Promise, that is *Pulchrum*" (Hobbes 1996: 39).[1] The beautiful is thus not (only) the symbol, expression, appearance or illusion of the good. Hobbes rather conceives of their relation as a practical one. The beautiful *promises* the good – that means the beautiful does not only tell us what or how the good is but also that there actually is, or will be, the good. The beautiful promises us that the good is about to come, even to being brought about, and hence assures us that it is possible: that there will and thus can be the good, that it will and thus can be made.

In this regard Hobbes may well sound like a late variation of Plato, who described beauty as "the goddess who presides over the procreation of the good" (Plato 1961: 558). But Hobbes actually ascribes a radically new meaning to the relation of promise between the beautiful and the good. This becomes clear when we read his definition of the beautiful in connection with his new conception of the good. This is the conception of the good as worth or value. While before Hobbes, the concept of "value" pertains to the economic realm of exchange, in and with Hobbes it begins to define the logic of the good as such.

Hobbes' definition of value runs as follows:

> The *Value*, or WORTH, of a man, is as of all other things, his Price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his Power: and therefore not absolute; but a thing dependent on the need and judgement of another.
>
> (Hobbes 1996: 63)

There are two elements to this definition:

 (i) The value of something or someone (this distinction is irrelevant to the concept of value) consists in its utility, that is, in the fact that it has a certain power. The concept of value is a practical, more precisely, an instrumental concept: that something has a value means that it permits the realization of practical processes, that it is a resource for such practical processes. Something is valuable because one is able to accomplish something by means of it, because one has the capacity by means of it to realize some end with success.

(ii) Any value exists *for someone*. A value is "not absolute". A value is therefore relative: the value of something is essentially related to someone who evaluates or estimates it. Where values are concerned, we must always ask the question: for whom is it a value? To have a value, or to be a value, means to be related to something else which is thereby defined as the subjective instance of evaluation.

Values are (i) practical and enabling and (ii) relative and subjective in character. In acts of evaluation a subject assesses something that it encounters with regard to whether it possesses some potential that the subject can use.

If the beautiful promises the good, if the good is a value, if value is a power we can use and if, finally, usable power is nothing but a capacity, then it follows that the beautiful is a promise of power as a usable capacity. This is Hobbes' new, bourgeois, definition of the beautiful: it is the appearance – "*Mine or Countenance*" – of power as capacities.

That the beautiful is an *appearance* or promise of the good means that it *is* not the good. It is not the "Good in Effect, as the end desired, which is called *Jucundum*, *Delightfull*", nor the "Good as the Means, which is called *Utile*, *Profitable*" (Hobbes 1996: 40). The beautiful is neither one nor the other: we do not evaluate an object as beautiful because it is delightful, as the realized end, or useful, as a means or tool. For Hobbes, the reality of the good (in these two forms) and that of the beautiful, the good in appearance, are quite different. And yet they are related – through an act of promising: the beautiful *promises* the good; and it promises that we shall realize our purposes and find the useful means for doing so. It promises us, in other words, that we are capable to act with success. To say that the beautiful promises the good is to say that it promises our capacity (to realize the good). The beautiful says: you can, you are capable to act with success. Or again the beautiful tells us: you are capable of effecting something, you have powers that you can

use – subjective powers, that is, capacities, and objective powers, that is, resources or assets. That the beautiful promises the good, for Hobbes, means that it promises us certain capacities. Or we may say that in the beauty of some other we are concerned precisely with ourselves. Our pleasure in the beauty of some other is our anticipatory pleasure in our own possession of capacities and resources.[2]

Thus, the beautiful not only promises value but in so promising the beautiful itself is (or has) a value. The beauty of a thing or person promises us that we have, or can have, the capacities and resources for acting with success. It promises us powers that we can use and that thus have value (or even *are* values) for us. The beautiful promises the valuable. And by doing this, the beautiful itself has or is a value, a usable power, for us. The value of beauty lies in the promise of practical value. The capacity to promise as the promise of capacity: this is the new definition of beauty with which Hobbes inaugurates modern aesthetics.

The value of beauty

In its new bourgeois interpretation beauty is determined by its relation to the practical world, to the world of what we can use in order to act with success. This relation is indirect, and that defines the position of the aesthetic in bourgeois society. The beautiful does not *help* us to act with success. It is not itself of practical value. Aesthetic value and practical value are distinct. And all the more closely connected for that reason: the beautiful does not contribute to successful action, but it promises it by showing its possibility: *our* possibility, as capacity, to successful action. The beautiful leads out of the world only in order to let it be experienced as our own. In the experience of the beautiful, outside of or at the edge of the practical world – in the evening or on holiday, after work – we experience ourselves as capable participants in this world. Our pleasure in the beautiful is the pleasure in ourselves, in our capacities, in ourselves as subjects.

This accounts for the particular and exemplary value that the beautiful possesses for the members of bourgeois society. To say that something is valuable is to say that it has a power that is of use for us: it offers the possibility of successful action. All such ascriptions of value are hypothetical in character; evaluations are wagers upon the future, presumptions that something indeed has a capacity that we can use. The beautiful, on the other hand, *promises* the good, and thereby promises that there *are* capacities and resources. For the beautiful is what lets capacities appear. In the beautiful we experience our capacities, if only in the form of semblance. That is why bourgeois society needs the experience of beauty: the beautiful transforms the presumption of value into its promise, the hypothesis of value into its epiphany. The value of the beautiful appearance lies in the beautiful appearance of values.

Kant writes:

> Beautiful things indicate that human beings belong in the world [or: are fitted for the world] and that even our intuition of things accords with the laws of our intuition.
>
> (Kant 1969: n. 1820a)

It is only when our intuitions are in concord with their laws, that is to say, it is only when our sensibility and our understanding belong to one another rather than being external to one another, that they *are* capacities or rather two aspects of a *single* capacity: the capacity of knowledge. Only then can the human being belong in the world. In our everyday or practical life, it appears as if our sensibility and our understanding do not concur with one another, that they are alien to one another and that we are alienated from ourselves, that we cannot therefore know or act in the world either: that we have no capacity, no capacities. The beautiful, on the other hand, and therein lies its value, places us in a certain condition – the condition of aesthetic pleasure – wherein it appears (to us), and in which we are assured, that we are indeed in concord (*Übereinstimmung*, harmony) with ourselves and thus in concord with the world. And this is not just some kind of good feeling, but the feeling of the good. In aesthetic pleasure we appear to ourselves and the world appears to us as though we belong together, and thus that we are able to act with success in the world: in short, that we are in possession of capacities, that is to say, that we are subjects. Herein lies the constitutive significance that the aesthetic, the concept and the experience of the beautiful, possesses for bourgeois society, for the modern subject. The subject encounters itself, its capacities, only in the semblance of beauty.[3]

The paradox of capacity and power

Hobbes' new, bourgeois definition of beauty comprises the following four statements:

  (i) Beauty promises the good.
 (ii) The good is the valuable; it is that which has or is a value for someone.
(iii) The valuable is a usable power, and a usable power is a (subjective or objective) capacity; it makes someone capable of performing something successfully.
(iv) Hence beauty promises us capacities. The value of beauty is the promise of value.

Since being capable of something defines subjectivity, we can also say that beauty promises subjectivity. This is the fundamental role of the aesthetic for the modern subject. While in our practices we can only presuppose that we *are* in the form of capacity, that is to say, subjects (for without this form-presupposition there is no praxis), in the aesthetic condition, for as long as it lasts, we *possess* the form of capacity. And this being in the aesthetic condition is our own activity (for aesthetic experience is our accomplishment, something we "make" [Kant]): we can say that through aesthetic experience we *give* ourselves the form of capacity. The aesthetic is the production of capacity, as form.[4] The aesthetic is the medium of the self-production of the subject in the form of capacity, that is to say, as the self-formation of the capable subject. The aesthetic is the capacity of capacity – the capacity *for* capacity.

What does it mean to either have or acquire the form of capacity? A capacity is a specific form of unity. For a capacity is the practical possibility, or power, to successfully realize a specific kind of action. A capacity is the possibility of success or accomplishment; the capacity has a teleological structure. In the form of capacity, power and normative success thus coincide. (Or in other terms: in capacity, power and the will coincide, because the will is the internal representation of the teleological structure of capacity.) In capacity, power is thus normatively structured or shaped.

That beauty promises the good – Hobbes' initial statement with which everything begins – thus means that beauty either assures us of or even brings about the normative, teleological shape of our powers; it turns or forms our powers into capacities. This is the productivity of beauty. But it is precisely here that "the paradox of capacity and power" (Foucault) unfolds. Following the explanations before, we can now understand this paradox in such a way that power in the form of capacity is inextricably linked with, indeed dependent on, the effectivity of a power that does not have the form of capacity. Capacity is paradoxically entwined with non- or incapacity.

The first way in which this shows is the fact that the aesthetic bringing about of the form of capacity is a process of "overpowering":

> To the essence of power belongs the overpowering of itself. . . . Will for itself does not exist any more than does power for itself. Hence, also, will and power are, in will to power, not merely linked together; but rather the will, as the will to will, is itself the will to power in the sense of the empowering for power.
>
> (Heidegger 1977: 78)

The subject that deals with something beautiful must thereby become the scene or instance of a power which it exerts on itself and by which it gives itself the form of power that can either be used by itself or others – that is, the form of capacity. And this power by which the usability of power (or the form of capacity) is only brought about cannot itself have the form of a capacity; there is no capacity to bring about a capacity. A power that does not have the form of capacity or subjectivity is thus the condition of possibility of the production of usable power as capacity or subjectivity. (Or non-autonomy is the condition of possibility of autonomy.)

But there is also a second way in which the aesthetic bringing about of the form of capacity is paradoxically entwined with a power that does not have that form, with non- or incapacity. The aesthetic condition is productive; it transforms our powers into capacities. But how is the aesthetic condition itself generated? It is the effect of beauty. In Hobbes' perspective, therein lies the good or value of beauty – its useful power for us. We thus can say (see previously) that the value of beautiful appearances lies in the appearance of value, of powers which we can use. The power of beauty – its power to bring about the form of capacity – would thus itself be a capacity. And to make us appear as subjects or to let our form of

subjectivity appear would accordingly itself be the use that we make of the capacity of beauty. But then the result or effect of the aesthetic condition were already presupposed in its making. The aesthetic condition would be superfluous. The fact that it is not – that the reference to the aesthetic condition is indeed constitutive for the (bourgeois) subject – presupposes precisely that the circle does not close completely: that a power is effective in beauty that does not have the form of usability, the form of capacity. While the form of capacity is internally defined by the unity of power and normativity – because only this unity makes a power usable by a subject for the performance of an action – the subject's experience of itself, as having the form of capacity, depends on a power that does not have this form. Or while the form of capacity internally, in its or our self-consciousness, claims that all powers of the subject are teleological and normative, this claim itself depends on a power that is non-teleological and a-normative.

This is the "paradox of capacity and power" (or one version, the aesthetic version of this paradox). While the internal structure of the capacity is the unity of power and normativity, it depends for its existence on a power prior to or beyond normativity. The paradox of capacity thus lies in nothing but in its relation to power (as non-capacity[5]): in the fact that capacity not only arises by standing in relation to power but only exists in this relation – and thus, strictly speaking, in a relation that contradicts its inner structure.

Aesthetics as ideology?

So far, I have been considering the paradox of capacity in its critical form, namely as a critique of what has been called "aesthetic ideology" (de Man 1996). Aesthetic ideology, the aesthetic as ideology, asserts the inner unity that constitutes the form of capacity. It asserts, in other words, that capacity stands beyond power. This is not merely some arbitrary claim that one can simply set aside yet continue speaking about capacities. On the contrary, this claim defines the form of capacity. The critique of aesthetic ideology consists in showing that this position supposedly beyond power, the form of capacity, is a (necessary) semblance. It is an aesthetic effect, that is to say, an effect of the aesthetic condition which in itself is the effect of power: the effect of a power that escapes the form of capacity, hence of subjectivity.

But this same thesis that is meant to criticize aesthetics as ideology also has a second and quite contrary affirmative meaning. The thesis "capacity is a paradox (for it stands in an indissoluble relation to power as non-capacity)" describes both the semblance or illusion of capacity and its truth: namely, its good, its truly felicitous shape. For the fact that capacity stands in relation to power, thus never stands outside this external relationship, is never external to externality, is what defines its fulfillment. In its affirmative meaning, the claim that capacity is a paradox states that capacity is only felicitously achieved, or is only truly free, if it stands in a permanent relationship to its other, namely to a non- or incapacity. This is the other or alternative doctrine, the doctrine of another or alternative aesthetics that contests the (bourgeois and postmodern) ideology of the value of beauty.

Power as force

We have seen that Stendhal's interpretation of beauty – the idea that it is nothing but the promise of happiness – leads into the heart of aesthetic ideology. Stendhal's formula cites Hobbes' radical redefinition of the beautiful: the beautiful is (or has) a value, that is to say, a power that we can make use of, that is, a potential or capacity, because it promises us capacities and thereby procures the form of capacity for us. The value of beauty lies in the power of self-formation that leads to the capable subject.

But Stendhal himself understood his formula not as his own program, but rather as critique. The idea that beauty is *nothing but* a promise of happiness, which Stendhal develops in his theory of love, holds in the field of the arts only for theatre, which is a lower and debased art for Stendhal, or more precisely the paradigm of the emerging culture industry (Stendhal 1915: chaps. XVII–XIX). It is only *this* beauty that has a value and thus the potential to indicate capacities. And from this he specifically distinguishes what he calls "ideal beauty" (which he finds in sculpture and painting; 41, 59). The intention behind Stendhal's formula is thus an essentially critical one: namely, the critical insight that the beautiful has thereby been relativized, culturalized, socialized and ultimately economized, that the beautiful has been ascribed a specific value – that it is regarded as a potential that we can utilize *in* and *for* our cultural, social and economic practices.

But from what perspective is this critique mounted? What is the counter-concept to beauty as a value and thus as the semblance or illusion of capacity? Stendhal's counter-concept of ideal beauty, which stands "outside of the sphere of passion" and thus of life (Stendhal 1915: 73), seems to see the alternative to the economism of values in a return to the metaphysics of beauty, with which Hobbes had broken. But we may also understand Stendhal's claim against the reduction of beauty to the promise of happiness as a challenge to read Hobbes' definition, which initiates modern aesthetics, in a new and quite different way. We must thus re-traverse the path of modern aesthetics, which has led to the economism (and biologism; see note 4) of contemporary thought, back to the very beginning and submit the two central concepts around which Hobbes' interpretation of the beautiful turns – the concept of "power" and the concept of "promise" – to renewed consideration. What is the power of the beautiful, and what is its promise? I shall outline a few brief observations on both these questions.

Hobbes' decisive move was to elucidate "power" by reference to "use". To say that something is or has a power is to say that we can make use of it. And this means that power is a capacity. Capacities are related – teleologically or instrumentally – to the good, to the successful realization of action. Through my capacities I am *able* to do something: to achieve something successfully, to perform something well. Since all of this lies in my intention when I act, capacities and their utilization are selfconscious in character.

Modern aesthetics develops a counter-concept of power: power not as capacity but as force (Menke 2012: chap. III). Both capacity and force are possibilities of effecting something, but they do so in quite different ways. Capacities are

actualized in actions that a subject performs with will and knowledge. Forces, by contrast, work in and of themselves, independent of the willing and knowing of the subject, in other words, unconsciously. They unfold in a play that is free, namely aimless and ungoverned in character. As the working of forces, play is an infinite producing and transgression of its own product – without any result to which such movement is teleologically directed. We can recognize the way such force works in the phenomena of dreams, of intoxication, of imagination. *Capacity* is a power of bringing something about, a power that a subject has acquired through exercise and repetition. *Force* is a power of effecting something that we have without having learnt it and thus without our being able to direct it. Power as force is human, but it is not subjective. It is the dimension of human beings that is averse to subjectivity and that precisely thereby makes subjectivity possible. Or what we call the human being is the place and time, the scene, where power as capacity and power as force encounter one another, struggle with one another, make one another possible.

The insight vouchsafed by aesthetics, an insight that it wrests from art, is this: the power of human beings only exists in the paradoxical unity of capacity and force; power is not (not simply, not identical with) capacity. Or achievement only exists through the paradoxical unity of capacity and force; achievement is not (not simply, not identical with) the actualization of capacities. Whenever we successfully achieve something, this never comes about solely because we have exercised our capacities; it never comes about without capacity on our part, but also never through such capacity alone. It requires an "addendum" or "something further":

> This "something further" [*das Hinzutretende*] is an impulse, the rudiment of a phase in which the dualism between extramental and intramental was not thoroughly consolidated yet, neither bridgeable by the will nor an ontological ultimate. . . . The impulse, intramental and somatic in one, drives beyond the conscious sphere to which it belongs just the same.
>
> (Adorno 1983: 228; transl. modified)

The beauty of art captures a felicitous achievement that transcends the praxis of capacity. Art is beautiful insofar as it is more than the exercise of a capacity. The beauty of art is an expression of the unity, that is to say, of the contention between capacity and force, of capacity and incapacity; it manifests the capacity to incapacity. It is not the form of capacity that we acquire through the beauty of art. On the contrary, the beauty of art leads our capacities to their limits and thereby leads us beyond ourselves. This is the power of beauty – not the power that it has for us, but the power that it has *over* us: the power of beauty brings our power beyond the condition, beyond the form of mere capacity, and permits the contention between capacity and force to unfold within us.

Thus, Stendhal's formula that calls beauty the *promise* of happiness also assumes a quite different meaning from that which was prefigured by Hobbes and which still stirs its current popularity. There is a difference of meaning here that is small but at the same time infinite: the difference between Hobbes' "Good

in the Promise" and Stendhal's *promesse de bonheur* – between goodness and happiness. The good is the successfully achieved end of purposive action, an end that we can produce through the exercise of capacities. Happiness, on the other hand – or a felicitous deed – goes beyond anything that can be produced through the exercise of capacities. The good is the realization of ends, while that which transpires felicitously surpasses the practical order of ends, capacities and purposive actions. Nothing can be experienced as felicitous without some relation to the ends that guide our actions. But at the same time the felicitous goes beyond any end, it is over and above fulfillment, at once the fulfillment *and* the surpassing of the ends that motivate our practices. And this is what we experience in the beautiful: those things and deeds are beautiful where something felicitously comes about, something that no one *can* bring about, thus something that no one can will either, yet something that is dreamt and hoped for in all willing.

The beauty of art is the negation of the immanent principle of praxis. It negates the conceptual correlation, the criterial nexus of actions, ends and capacities, without which none of these concepts would possess any meaning and without which there would be no such thing as praxis. But it is precisely by virtue of this negativity in relation to praxis that art is affirmative. Through its negativity art is the affirmation of a felicitous achievement that is impossible in the context of practice since it cannot be produced by the self-conscious exercise of our capacities. What the beauty of art allows to appear is precisely what we cannot do – what we cannot produce and consequently what we cannot aim to realize either, but what all doing, producing and aiming hopes for: "the ineffable affirmative" (Adorno). The beauty of art is therefore irreducibly ambiguous: it is at once the lie and the force of art, and beauty is at once an ideology and an imperative. Through its beauty art lies because it asserts the actuality of a felicitous achievement that is practically impossible or unachievable, of the felicitous that in our life and praxis, where we are concerned with our happiness, our felicity, is not indeed actual. But this also harbors an imperative: it commands us to heed or emulate it in the realm of praxis. The beauty of art drives beyond itself toward a transformation of praxis. Beauty promises (the possibility of) a different practice.

The power of beauty

Since the power of beauty is thus not a potential or resource that we can utilize, and since the value of a thing or human being, in Hobbes' definition, consists in having a certain power that we can use and for which we are consequently prepared to pay a certain price – that is to say, a power that is a potential or a capacity – it thus follows that beauty is not the value of art; that art has beauty but no value; that art is without value precisely by virtue of its beauty. Art is valueless. And this means, conversely, to ascribe value to art on the basis of its beauty would be to rob it of its force, would be to reduce its power, and thus our power, to a mere potential or resource, a mere capacity.

Following Heidegger, in his critical discussion of Nietzsche, we can call such reduction "nihilism" (Heidegger 1977). To ascribe a value to art is nihilistic. For it reduces power to a capacity, a resource (which we can use). This holds for the power that art possesses through its beauty, but thereby also to power in general. To ascribe a value to art, to treat its beauty as a value, is the economization of the aesthetic that is at stake precisely in the so-called aesthetization of the economic. In our (theoretical and practical) resistance to the economic definition of beauty as value, what is ultimately at stake is therefore a struggle regarding power. This is not so much a struggle over who possesses power as a struggle over *what power is and how it is*. It is an ontological (and – only thereby – also a political) struggle.

Aesthetics, in theory and practice, is the arena where the meaning of beauty is contested. But since this struggle regarding what the beautiful is – a value or a force – is also the struggle regarding what power is, what action is, what achievement is, what subjectivity is, we find that aesthetics is the site of a struggle regarding who we are: whether we are subjects, nothing but instances of capacities, or whether we are at once less and more than capable subjects. What is at stake in this struggle is thus whether there is freedom – freedom beyond autonomy.

Notes

* Translated by Nicholas Walker.
1 Stendhal found the formulation in Hobbes' *De homine*. See Döring 2007.
2 A brief clarification as to terminology: *Power* is the possibility of an effect; power is efficiency or efficacy. Then there are *usable* powers – powers which a subject possesses, by nature or acquisition, and which it can use in order to produce something, to realize its goals. Usable powers (in German: *Vermögen*) then exist in two forms: in subjective form, as capacities, and in objective form, as resources. A capacity is thus a subjective usable power through which something or someone possesses a value. This prompts the question whether there is a form of – subjective – power which does not consist in being usable qua or as capacity. I shall return to this issue at the end.
3 In traditional bourgeois aesthetics, the value of beauty consists in what it shows about us. Since Nietzsche, and especially in contemporary postmodern (Alexander Nehamas) and neo-Darwinist (Winfried Menninghaus) forms of aesthetics, Stendhal's formula – "La beauté n'est que la promesse de bonheur" – has been given a more activist reading. Beauty is here granted an effective role in the stimulation and production of capacity. Beauty in this view *makes* us capable; the experience of beauty is the medium of 'capacitation': of the enhancement, even generation of capacities. This corresponds to the role of the aesthetic in contemporary, post-industrial capitalism in which the aesthetic act of consumption plays itself a productive role: in it, we produce ourselves as universally consumable labor power (Zygmunt Bauman). The beautiful promise of goodness as value or usable power is fulfilled by beauty itself; beauty keeps its promise. The circle of values, in which Hobbes connected the beautiful with the good at the beginning of bourgeois society, has been closed. Aesthetic value and economic value coincide.
4 This is distinguished from the *material* production of capacity by the aesthetic condition in the (post-)Nietzschean reading of Stendhal's formula; see note 4.
5 Without further qualifications, I will use the term "power" in the following in this narrow sense: as referring to that specific type of power (in the general sense as practical possibility) that does not have the form of capacity. Another term I will suggest for this type of power is "force".

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9   Life as the subject of society

Critical vitalism as critical social theory

Heike Delitz

Introduction: French critical vitalism, or New Vitalism

The following contribution examines a specific tendency, or movement, within New Materialism: that is, the kind of materialism that deals with *living* matter – or, *New Vitalism*. This particular type of New Materialism suspends the Cartesian dualisms of "mind and matter", "individual and society", "life and society" and "matter and life". As a (social) thought that takes both affects and matter seriously, New Vitalism follows Henri Bergson's philosophy in many respects. Since the 1950s, French authors like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Hyppolite and, most importantly, Gilles Deleuze have radicalized Bergson's thought, transforming it into a new, *Bergsonian* philosophy. This development is particularly evident in the works of Georges Canguilhem and Gilbert Simondon. Such a Vitalism regards life, or vital matter, not only as the *object* of both society and sociology but as the *subject* of all social facts. Insofar as New Vitalism represents an epistemological critique (of the usual ways in which the relations between subject and object are thought of), it elaborates a critical social theory of its own. It is a critical vitalism, criticizing social institutions as well as social concepts *in the name of life*. In particular, critical vitalism challenges positivistic (as well as evolutionary and deterministic) attitudes toward the living being, arguing instead for the unforeseeable "becoming-another" of social life. Against this background, the following contribution seeks to make *New Vitalism* visible as a *critical social theory* – in short, as *critical vitalism*. This vitalism is part and parcel of the *New Materialism* that – in the work of both Brian Massumi (2002) and Jane Bennett (2010), among others – carries on in the tradition of Spinoza, Bergson, Simondon and Deleuze.

Critical vitalism

The notion of critical vitalism finds expression in the work of the Henri Bergson expert, Frédéric Worms. Worms defines critical vitalism as an idea of social and human reality that – in the first place – asserts that there is something within "life" that cannot be reduced to anything else. Here, "life" is understood *neither* as an essence, *nor* as a singular value (as it might have been defined by classical vitalism), but as a process or tension. For it is not only life which *is*; rather, what *is* can

best be defined as a series of oppositions between life and its other (i.e., between life and the living being; or, in the social context, between care and power):

> Critical vitalism consists in maintaining . . . that there is something ultimate and irreducible in "life", but that precisely it is not a question of "life" understood as an essence. . . . [It] s not "life" that is ultimate in theory and in practice, but a series of tensions or oppositions.
>
> (Worms 2015: 15, transl. author)

In supposing constitutive tensions within life, critical vitalism opposes not only substantialist Vitalism but all anti-vitalist systems. Worms also defines critical vitalism as non-anthropocentric. It doesn't privilege *human* life but regards the latter only as the furthest possible extension of the tensions inherent in all life. Thus, critical vitalism involves not only an epistemological critique (in the Kantian sense) but a practical, or ethical, critique as well.

> If one understands by criticism the contestation of any apparent unity. . ., when it masks a vital tension which persists, one must say, not only that vitalism must be critical, but that criticism . . . requires a vitalism.
>
> (Worms 2015: 28, transl. author)

Within critical vitalism – a notion that, in French philosophy, was first elaborated by Georges Canguilhem – it is (human) *life* that formulates self-corrections to *life* – regardless of whether such corrections concern scientific thought or political and social techniques. Or, in societal debates regarding life-related issues (e.g., issues of public health, demographics or racism), *life speaks for itself*, regardless of whether such debates are practical or theoretical. In the final analysis, social and epistemological critiques are the province of *living beings themselves*. In this sense, social critique necessitates a vitalism.

Life as both the subject and the object of social facts (Canguilhem and Plessner)

Moving beyond Worms' definition, or leaving the domain of practical philosophy, I would like to argue for critical vitalism's relevance for both *social theory* and *a theory of society*. Within social theory, critical vitalism recognizes life not only as the object but also as the *subject* of all social and societal phenomena – including the social sciences themselves. The formula, "life as both subject and object of the social", defines a vitalist concept of social life, or a "sociology of life".[1] This twofold notion of a sociology of life (*genitivus subjectivus*, *genitivus objectivus*) is informed by both Georges Canguilhem and Helmuth Plessner. Plessner defines philosophical anthropology as that discipline which regards human life as both subject and object of nature *and* subject and object of culture: one can only "hope to really comprehend the human" (as both a living being and a cultural being) if one understands it as "the subject-object of culture and as the subject-object of

nature without breaking him up into artificial abstractions" (Plessner 2019: 28). It was Canguilhem, however, who rehabilitated Vitalism *expressis verbis* against the charges of metaphysics and irrationalism, which persist to this day:

> Vitalism is the expression of the confidence the living being has in life, of the self-identity of life within the living human being conscious of living. [V] italism translates a permanent exigency of life in the living, the self-identity of life immanent to the living.
>
> (Canguilhem 2008b: 62)

For Canguilhem, Vitalism is a rationalism. It is even a *more reflective* rationalism, for it recognizes the "originality" of life in the living human being.

> For our part, we think that a reasonable rationalism must know to recognize its limits and to incorporate the conditions of its practice. Intelligence can apply itself to life only if it recognizes the originality of life. The thought of the living must take from the living the idea of the living.
>
> (Canguilhem 2008a: xx)

Canguilhem thus criticizes self-misunderstandings of human life in the sciences – in particular, the human sciences (e.g., medicine, psychology, ethnology and sociology). He does so in the name of human life and in view of the political and practical consequences that such misunderstandings carry. At the same time as Canguilhem, Gilbert Simondon (who was similarly influenced by Bergson) developed a critical vitalism to critique social concepts and social techniques in the name of both life and matter *in general* (i.e., in the name of both living and nonliving matter).

Critical vitalism in particular in the Bergsonian line: becoming, matter, life

Simondon, Canguilhem, Worms and Gilles Deleuze (the *spiritus rector* of New Materialisms in general) are all informed by the work, method and vocabulary of Henri Bergson. None of them regard Bergson's philosophy of life as either substantialist, metaphysical or irrational; nor do they understand it as a conception of "inner" (and exclusively *human*) life – that is, as a phenomenology. By contrast, many others read and have read Bergson in one of these two ways (for instance, Alfred Schütz, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl and also Plessner, on the German side). When one considers French readings of Bergson since 1945 – particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *éloge* to Bergson (Merleau-Ponty 1982; see Bianco 2011, 2015), Jean Hyppolite's courses and articles (Hyppolite 1971: 443–97), and Deleuze's articles and book on Bergson (Deleuze 1956, 1991, 1999; cf. Lundy 2018) – his philosophy emerges as something quite different. It appears to be nothing less than a new philosophical system, consisting of at least three philosophical innovations. First, Bergsonian philosophy is a general philosophy

of difference (Deleuze 1999, 1991). More precisely, Bergson invents a *philosophy of differentiation* in the sense of a continuous *becoming-another*, or temporal difference. The tendency to regard matter – in particular, living matter – as well as both concepts and affects (in short, reality) as in continuous, unforeseeable and irreversible alteration is a core element of Bergson's thought. Therefore, his critique is leveled first and foremost at any philosophy of identity, or of representation, within the sciences (particularly within the life and social sciences).

A second innovation, strictly related to this process-oriented view, is Bergson's *ontology of immanence*. He argues that external entities, like "matter", "body" and other artifacts, are inseparable from internal entities, like "mind" and "memory". In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson regards matter itself as an "image" or an affect (Bergson 1994), the varieties of which differ only in "intensity". In this regard, Deleuze (1991: 29) speaks of a philosophical "monism". Bergson's ontology of immanence is, therefore, also a critique of prevailing Cartesian dichotomies – such as those between matter and concept, life and thought, or body and mind. Third, Bergsonian philosophy is a *New Vitalism*, a *philosophy of life*, in which "life" is understood not as a force or substance, but as duration or becoming. Bergson is neither irrational, nor interested merely in human life alone. His vitalism does not partake of the deconstructive mode of Nietzsche's philosophy of life; nor should it be confused with hermeneutical philosophies of life (such as Wilhelm Dilthey's).

> Bergson is not one of those philosophers who ascribes a properly human wisdom. . . . To open us up to the inhuman and the superhuman (*durations* which are inferior or superior to our own), to go beyond the human condition: This is the meaning of philosophy.
>
> (Deleuze 1991: 28)

On the basis of these three philosophical pillars (philosophy of differentiation, ontology of immanence and New Vitalism), Bergson – or Bergsonian thought – develops a particular theory of society. More precisely, it is a *sociology of life*, which takes (living) matter seriously, critiquing reductionist and Cartesian understandings of both the social and of matter. In this way, Bergsonian theory of society could also be regarded as a *New Materialism*, in different ways: on the one hand, in regarding living (Bergson) or non-living (Simondon) matter as having its own potentials of meanings and forms – or seeing matter as "alive" – these authors share a *literal* materialism. On the other hand, Bergsonian social thought articulates an alternative theory of society, compared now in particular to Marxist "materialism". Instead of simply expressing a given social structure, a Bergsonian social thought takes matter, and with it artifacts and symbols, as constitutive for societal life: materiality is a mode in which the social is permanently being structured and classified. Or, with structuralist strands of social theory, these authors share a culturalist or a "post-foundational" theory of society (Marchart 2007). And last and thirdly, far away from articulating historical laws, a Bergsonian social theory always stresses the openness of human history, its unforeseeable becoming-another.

Let us now consider Bergson, Canguilhem and Simondon successively, in order to reconstruct their respective Critical Vitalisms. Here, our interest lies in these philosophers' respective *theories of society and in their corresponding critical views expressed in the name of life*.

Bergson: life as becoming and the critique of the question of (social) disorder

Bergson's philosophical accent always lies on becoming, or duration, under-stood as permanent alteration, or as temporality. Since 1945, the aforementioned French authors (Jean Hyppolite, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze, as well as Jean Wahl and Georges Canguilhem) have brought a new Bergson to light: namely, Bergson as the philosopher of becoming-another in all ontologi-cal regions. For Bergson, unforeseeable becoming-another is the distinguishing ontological feature of *living* beings, and specifically of *human* life. In the name of this life – understood as a constant becoming-another, or openness – Bergson calls into question any philosophy of identity (that is, any philosophy of being that relies on manipulating massive blocks of reality, such as distinctions between being and nothing, order and disorder, or reality and possibility). With regard to each of his books, Bergson critiques what he sees as the sciences' false, antique philosophical heritage – a heritage rooted in notions like being, representation and identity. For, instead of "identity" or "being", the distinguishing ontological feature of all matter is continuous and unforeseeable becoming-another. First, Bergson replaces the notion of identity with that of becoming in the field of psychology (Bergson 1957, 1994); he then performs similar operations in the fields of biology (Bergson 1911), physics (Bergson 1965) and, finally, sociol-ogy and ethnology (Bergson 1935). His aim is always the same: namely, to give the respective empirical facts a better interpretation, guided by the core idea of becoming and, more precisely, by the *difference in nature* between space and time. For Bergson, the difference between two sorts of multiplicity – as that between continuity and discontinuity, simultaneity and succession, the internal and the external, or thought and reality – is always primary (Bergson 1957: 4ff., 75ff.). Bergson's thought is a thoroughly non-essentialist philosophy of process. Therefore, he critiques not only evolutionary biology for thinking teleologically – that is, for regarding "evolution" as already "given", and not as a creative process (Bergson 1911: 43) – but also any evolutionist *sociological* theories. He also calls into question all sociologies that divide social states (particularly those that posit an opposition between social "order" and social "disorder"). Bergson invents a thoroughly non-Cartesian mode of thought, with which to critique all foundation-alist and determinist social theories.

Society as an imaginary instituted by social life

The aforementioned criticisms can all be found in Bergson's late (1935 [1932]) theory of society. Bergson's view that human creativity lends social reality its

quality of unforeseeable becoming is a critique of the French school of sociology's determinist theory of society and its overemphasis on social constraint. And yet, Bergson's indebtedness to Émile Durkheim and the Durkheimians is profound: he shares not only their general interest in the social *function* of morality and religion but also their particular interest in Australian totemistic societies. At the same time, Bergson unfolds his own, new idea of social life, which is innovative in at least three respects. First, he conceives of society *avant la lettre* as an *imaginary institution*, as Castoriadis puts it later (1998), or as an imagined *fixation*. Here, Bergson echoes Durkheim when the latter speaks of society as collective representation, at the same time completing this social theory with a temporal aspect. Second, Bergson dismisses the problem of social order. For, when sociologists ask "how is social order possible, as opposed to disorder" (thereby assuming disorder to be "more probable" than order), they not only propagate a static conception of the real (i.e., the real as made up of blocks of order and disorder). They also pose a "pseudo-problem", as Bergson puts it (1911: 242, 302), resulting from the "pseudo-idea" of disorder. As he shows in his critique of negative notions, "disorder" already includes *more*, not *less*, content than order. That is, it encompasses the idea of order *plus* its absence. The notion of disorder consists

> in believing that there is less in the idea of the empty than in the idea of the full, less in the concept of disorder than in that of order. In reality, there is more intellectual content in the ideas of disorder and nothingness. . ., because they imply several orders, several existences and, in addition, a play of thought.
>
> (Bergson 1946: 116; cf. Bergson 1911: 241–3)

There are always different social orders, but never social disorder. The problem of society is not rooted in a "natural" tendency to disorder; rather, the problem of social life is rooted in the becoming of the social – that is, of all individuals, actions, affects, institutions and artifacts. And thirdly, if a Durkheimian sociologist takes social life primarily as a series of constraints (negative actions), Bergson – like David Hume before him, or Gilles Deleuze afterwards – stresses invention (positive action). A social institution must first be invented; negative actions (sanctioning, normative stabilization) come second. Therefore, according to Bergson, sociology should be the science of collective *creations*, or fabulations – that is, processes of becoming-another. The notion of fabulation simultaneously serves to define the imagined social fixation, or the conventions and institutions of society. In sum, for Bergson, social life (given its inherent creativity and real becoming-another) is possible only as *societal* life, namely, as an imagined collective identity, or as an imagined society. The social must fix itself in order to exist as such (i.e., as a collective); such is the function of rituals, narratives and taboos (Durkheim's norms). But no society is really fixed. New collectives are always possible. The "door will ever stand open to fresh creations" (Bergson 1935: 61; see also Seyfert 2011).

The instituting society – a vital ground for the social

To describe the relation between social life (becoming, alteration) and societal life, Bergson uses the Spinozist terms *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. Whereas *natura naturans* refers to the virtual whole of social life (which is continuous becoming), *natura naturata* refers to the imagined stops, or to the "imaginary institution" (Castoriadis 1998) or fixation of society. Bergson describes thus two aspects of societal life. The first consists of limiting, differentiating collectives and the institution of dogmas and taboos. The second involves the invention of new social ideas, like that of "humanity". In this way

> passing from social solidarity to the brotherhood of man, we break with one particular nature, but not with all nature. It might be said . . . that it is to get back to *natura naturans* that we break away from *natura naturata*. Hence, between the first morality and the second, lies the whole distance between repose and movement.
>
> (Bergson 1935: 44f.)

Using exactly the same formulation, Castoriadis speaks of the constitutive tension between *instituting society* and *instituted society*:

> The social-historical is the anonymous collective whole. . . . It is, on the one hand, given structures, "materialized" institutions and works, whether these be material or not; and, on the other hand, that which structures, institutes, materializes. [I]t is the union and the tension of instituting society and of instituted society.
>
> (Castoriadis 1998: 180)

Reflecting the reality of a living being, the social is unforeseeable self-alteration or becoming. "The social-historical is perpetual flux of self-alteration – and can only exist by providing itself with 'stable' figures" (Castoriadis 1998: 204). Societal life thus requires first and foremost an "imaginary institution", or fixation – an imagined collective identity in time. Castoriadis' main work, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, also entails the idea of a final, "primary" or "central", *imaginary signification*. Ultimately, society is not determined. Any given collective is founded in accordance with a central, imagined signifier, which denies the collective's contingency. Such central significations (God, the people, human rights, rationality) are fully imagined; they explain all other significations and yet cannot be explained in themselves. They are *empty signifiers*. Such significations "*denote* nothing at all, and they *connote* just about everything" (Castoriadis 1998: 143; emphasis as in original; cf. Delitz and Maneval 2017). In seeming to distinguish between two distinct types of society (i.e., closed and open ones), Bergson actually defines two aspects of *all* societal life. To the extent that life is becoming, collective existence implies an imagined institution, a *fabulation* of collective unity and identity that leaves open the possibility of ever new modes

of collective existence. Thus, any given institution is created, not determined. In this way, Vitalism should be regarded as a critique of both evolutionary theories (à la Durkheim) and of historical materialism (insofar as it involves a philosophy of history).

Bergsonian vitalism and the criticism of evolutionary social theories as ethnocentric

A social theory in the Bergsonian tradition – that is, one that takes permanent und unforeseeable becoming-another as society's central problem – can be seen in the work of Claude Levi-Strauss. The famous ethnologist not only took the idea of the imaginary and symbolic constitution of society from Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Lévi-Strauss 1963). He also followed Bergson, implicitly, with respect to the problem of becoming-another, particularly when it came to his interest in a given society's position with regard to history (i.e., the difference between "hot" and "cold" societies). Lévi-Strauss also elaborates a critique of negative notions, in his drive to arrive at a non-ethnocentric comparative sociology or anthropology. He argues that all societies deny their continuous becoming-another; though they have different ways of doing so. Obviously, there is no society without a history. The classical

> distinction between "peoples without history" and others [should] be replaced by a distinction between. . . "cold" and "hot" societies: the former seeking . . . to annul the possible effects of historical factors on their equilibrium and continuity. . .; the latter resolutely internalizing the historical process.
>
> <div align="right">(Lévi-Strauss 1962: 233–4)</div>

Totemistic classifications are positive institutions that actively deny a given society's unforeseeable alteration. Arguing in this vein, Pierre Clastres criticizes evolutionary concepts in the social sciences as ethnocentric. The observation that "primitive societies" are "societies without a State" is valid only at first glance. Such conclusions hide "a value judgment", namely, that these indigenous societies "are missing something – the State – that is essential to them, as it is to any other society: our own" (Clastres 1988: 189). In reality, there "are no societies without power" (ibid.: 21–2). Social analysis should therefore avoid negative concepts. Instead of speaking of societies *without* the State, or without history, one should describe such societies positively: just because they don't have state institutions doesn't mean that they are *missing* such institutions; rather, they should be regarded as *actively avoiding* such imaginary institutions – or, as instituting themselves *against* the State (or history).

Canguilhem: life as the subject of sociology (New Vitalism)

Georges Canguilhem adopts Bergson's critique of negative notions, now criticizing the discipline sociology in general and positivist sociologies in particular – in the

name of life. Therefore, we have to come back to this author, who most explicitly and most forcefully reanimates *vitalism* as a *theory* of (human) life. Canguilhem is – in the line of Bergson – the core author in taking life both as subject of society and as subject of knowledge. For this author, a more devoted, or reflective, position with regard to life is necessary, rather than reducing it to a purely biological or to a purely social fact. Canguilhem levels his critique particularly at the positivism of Auguste Comte, as well as that of Comte's intellectual heir, whom he takes to be Durkheim. In opposition to positivism, vitalism expresses "the self-identity of life within the living human being". It is vitalism, and not positivism, that introduces a "reasonable *rationalism*" (Canguilhem 2008a: xx; emphasis added) into the social sciences. Canguilhem's critique of positivist social science is threefold.

1. In Canguilhem's view, sociological positivism denies life's *normativity*. Asserting the existence of a polarity between the social and the individual – that is, between the social, on the one hand, and life, on the other – Durkheim regards life as a pure fact and furthermore as something that has to be normalized. But:

> We cannot say that the concept of the "pathological" is the logical contradiction of the concept of the "normal", for life in the pathological state is not the absence of norms but the presence of other norms. Rigorously speaking, "pathological" is the vital contrary of "healthy" and not the logical contradiction of "normal".
>
> (Canguilhem 2008c: 131)

Canguilhem thus criticizes positivism's or quantitative sociology's self-misunderstanding and self-reduction of human life with a view toward their political consequences. After all, a science of living beings that "deals with living beings as inert" is the first step toward "brutalizing a being" or "taking an aggressive attitude" toward it:

> Treating living things as inert is an implicit condition for the use of living things. . . . The first condition for brutalizing a being is to hold him or her a brute. . . . Conversely, if we spiritualize matter, if we hold it animated, we place ourselves . . . in no way in an aggressive stance.
>
> (Canguilhem 2007: 136)

A sociology (and a psychology) that regards social facts as things treats the living human being as an "insect" (Canguilhem 1968: 379). It clings to the illusion of analyzing human relations in a purely objective way, while preparing a *technology* of the living being. By contrast, life *in itself* is a normative activity; it is the *subject* of norms. And it is human life's destiny to err, or to go wrong. In this sense, social disorder is just as normal as order. It is neither pathological nor deviant, nor is it the opposite of society. For,

> not being an organism, society presupposes and even calls for regulations; there is no society without regulation, and there is no society without rules,

> yet in society, . . . regulation is always . . . something added on and always precarious. One could ask in this case, and without paradox, whether the normal state of a society is disorder and crisis, rather than order and harmony.
>
> (Canguilhem 2012: 77)

Disorder is the *normal* and not the abnormal, precarious or disintegrated state of society. For it "is enough that one individual in any society question the needs and norms of this society" to demonstrate that a society is not a harmonic whole and that social invention is not synonymous with crisis (Canguilhem 1991: 256).

2. For Canguilhem, when Comte and Durkheim distinguish between normal social states and pathological ones, or between social order and social disorder, they not only ignore the life and subjectivity of the social scientist. They also discriminate against *rare* facts (such as individual inventions or social movements), painting them as *pathological* or deviant. Indeed, Durkheim (like Comte) defined the normal as that which is most frequent and vice versa:

> A social fact is normal for a given social type, viewed at a given phase of its development, when it occurs in the average society of that species, considered at the corresponding phase of its evolution.
>
> (Durkheim 1982: 97)

On this point, Canguilhem borrows Bergson's critique of negative concepts. The "pathological is not the absence of a biological norm: it is another norm" (Canguilhem 1991: 144). In *The Two Sources* (1935: 21; cf. Canguilhem 1991: 194), Bergson had likewise argued that disease "is as normal as health" itself. The same principle applies to social life: within the social, there is neither pathology, disorder, nor an absence of norms. There are only norms that are "pushed aside" by social life (Canguilhem 1991: 144), namely, by the hegemonic forces within a society. For a living being in general,

> there are no failed forms. Nothing can be lacking to a living being once we accept that there are a thousand and one different ways of living. Just as in war and politics there is no definitive victory, but only a relative and precarious superiority or equilibrium, so in the order of life there are no successes that radically devalorize other attempts and make them appear failed. All successes are threatened, since individuals and even species die. Successes are delayed failures; failures are aborted successes. What decides the value of a form is what becomes of it. All living forms are . . . normalized monsters.
>
> (Canguilhem 2008c: 126)

3. Narrowly linked to this critique, Canguilhem locates positivism's final failure in its tendency to describe (social) life falsely, in terms of *quantitative* notions. By equating the more frequent with the normal, and the rare with the abnormal, the positivist mistakenly mixes *quantitative* criteria with normative or *intensive* criteria (or, in Bergson's terms, differences of degree with differences of essence

or intensity). Thus, "Broussais' principle" dominates modern sociology, which becomes a political position affirming the *ruling social order*. Broussais had established the idea "that the phenomena of disease coincided essentially with those of health, from which they differed only in terms of intensity" or degree (Canguilhem 1991: 44). It was Comte who transferred this physiological idea into the social sciences, inventing the analytical, quantitative or standardized sociology that remains so powerful today:

> According to the eminently philosophical principle which will serve from now on as a direct, general basis for positive pathology. . ., the pathological state is not at all radically different from the physiological state, with regard to which . . . it can only constitute a simple extension going more or less beyond the higher or lower limits of variation proper to each phenomenon of the normal organism.
>
> (Comte, quoted in Canguilhem 1991: 51)

Thus, the positivist social scientist establishes "a political doctrine scientifically" asserting that the "cure for political crises consists in bringing societies back to their essential and permanent structure, and tolerating progress only within limits of variation of the natural order defined by social statics" (Canguilhem 1991: 64). By the standards of such a sociology, a social order can never be transgressed, except in "pathological" or "abnormal" states. Here, critical vitalism critiques both positivist and rationalist thought, insofar as adherents of both schools rely on a static conception of the social, regard new or rare facts as abnormal, and – ignoring their own existence as living beings – treat social phenomena as pure facts.

Simondon: the life of matter (New Materialism)

Whereas Canguilhem concentrates exclusively on critique, Gilbert Simondon develops a "positive" social theory. He too adopts Bergson's prioritization of becoming:

> *Instead of grasping individuation using the individuated being as a starting point, we must grasp the individuated being from the viewpoint of individuation, and individuation from the viewpoint of preindividual being*, each operating at many different orders of magnitude. / I intend therefore to study the *forms, modes* and *degrees of individuation* in order to situate accurately the individual in the wider being according to the three levels of the physical, the vital and the psychosocial.
>
> (Simondon 1992: 311; emphasis as in original)

All reality, nonliving matter included, undergoes a continuous becoming. That which exists is not "a primordial given and substantial being" but precisely *becoming* itself. Therefore, Simondon argues inter alia for a "social energetic": sociology must "ask why, and under which conditions, societies change" (Simondon 2007:

63, my translation). His answer is: societies change in moments of "high tension of information", when new ideas are highly affective, or when the society is in a "meta-stable state" (Simondon 2007: 63). Simondon hereby (and most importantly) vitalizes *matter* itself, conceptualizing mechanical processes (such as crystallization) in terms of living beings. After all, becoming-another is not only the mode of existence of (human) living beings; it is also the mode of existence of artifacts and of technical beings. Hence, Deleuze and Guattari refer to a "technological Vitalism" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 449). Such a vitalism is also a critical vitalism – though it is less a critique of human self-misunderstanding than of misunderstandings involving *technical* beings. Inorganic matter, too, is "a capacity for becoming" (Simondon 1964: 33, my translation, cf. Simondon 2020a: 23) – and not the mere object of passive confrontations with an active form (the human intention). Matter, in both living organisms and nonliving beings, is not pure passivity. Rather, matter always has specific potentials, depending on which technical beings undergo their own evolution. Therefore, matter actively participates in social life. It is *technical* activity with matter that is truly creative. Technical activity – the intimate interaction of human actors with matter, which gives rise to a "veritable social reason" (Simondon 2007: 261, my translation; cf. Simondon 2020b: 412) – introduces a true sense of liberty into the collective. It is the only activity that is not subject to any normative constraints. Contrary to so many technophobic, anthropocentric and determinist theories of society – with their anti-technical positions (Eßbach 2001) – technical activity should be understood as being "initiative in the sense of individual liberty" (Simondon 2007: 261, my translation; cf. Simondon 2020b: 412). Simondon analyzes modern society as a particular *technical mode of collective existence*, characterized by a growing intensity of interactions, or a more intense entanglement of actors within technical ensembles. In such ensembles, a true "solidarity" is established, a qualitatively new

> form of participation in the natural world and in the human world that gives an incorruptible collective normativity to technical activity; it is no longer only a slightly abstract solidarity . . . but an extremely concrete and actual solidarity. . .; through the technical networks, the human world acquires a high degree of internal resonance.
>
> (Simondon 2017: 229)

This mode of collective existence reveals a "new concentration of beings", in which more organized collections of individuals emerge. In this integrated network of technical ensembles, "man's presence to machines is a perpetuated invention" (Simondon 2017: 18). Confronting both the technophobic declarations of the 20th century and the modern sciences' ignorance of their own technicity, Simondon encourages a new respect for *technique*. Or, he criticizes technophobic theories or theories of human self-alienation through techniques. Simondon's critique is furthermore applicable to all static and hierarchical concepts of *matter*, which are mere variations of the antique hylomorphic scheme (a philosophical conception that internalizes the sharp social division between intelligent work and

craftwork). Or, he calls for a new "partition of the sensible", as Jacques Rancière (2004) puts it, for a "more (vital) materialist theory of democracy", in which "the being of the demos" is not "a formed thing" that only involves human beings, but "an unruly activity or indeterminate wave of energy" that also takes nonhuman bodies into account (Bennett 2010: 106). Thus, Simondon enables a New Materialism in which matter

> appears as a self-disclosing activity rather than as a passive object of discovery: a singularly self-disclosing activity passing through context, rather than a general object of discovery whose disclosure at the hands of science is contained in context.
>
> (Massumi 2002: 228)

Conclusion: critical vitalism as both a critical theory of society and a New Materialism

The aforementioned authors all share a philosophy of becoming. They emphasize the *normativity* of life itself, which is bound to its creative, unforeseeable character, conceived as an absolutely non-deterministic ability to invent new forms of society. Social vitalism is, therefore, critical of any sociology, or political structure, that denies the *inventive*, or imaginative, character of the social (such as evolutionary theories and historical materialism, with their appeals to the laws of history). Critical vitalism is, simultaneously, a New Materialism in two senses: first, it is a critique of that (other) materialism, which regards structures of production as society's foundation. Second, it is a positive assertion of the vitality of both living and nonliving matter. Critical vitalism's critique also extends to the positivistic attitudes of social scientists – that is, to their twofold illusion of pure objectivity, in treating what they assume to be pure facts. It is a critique of all self-misunderstandings of human life, which applies in the first line to sociological theories, with all their political and human consequences, as part of social reality. Thus, one can distinguish three parallel critiques within critical vitalism:

1 It criticizes sociologies that deny the becoming-another, or openness, of collective life (be it by virtue of their false dichotomy between social order and disorder, or through their evolutionary – or determinist – conceptions of history). All societies are undetermined. Society is an imaginary institution (Castoriadis 1998). In this first respect, vitalism is critical in the name of the unforeseeable, inventive character of (human) life, asserting the continuous possibility of new values, social ideas and societal forms. "What characterizes [social] health is the possibility of transcending the norm", or the "possibility of . . . instituting new norms" (Canguilhem 1991: 196f.).

2 Critical vitalism's second critique relates to the practical consequences of both naturalism and positivism, in particular to the presumption that it is possible to operate within the social and life sciences as a natural scientist of nonliving matter. In dealing with quantitative data, social scientists ignore

their own subjectivity, discriminate against new and rare social facts, and subordinate social change to the idea of social order, which they regard as primary.

3   Technical or material vitalism posits a new idea of technical beings, and of human (i.e., cultural) activity. It thus gives rise to a new notion of "liberty": namely, "liberty" as an *affective resonance* between the human actor and matter – unlimited by social norms – in which creativity lies within matter itself (or between matter and the human being; see Henning's chapter in this volume).

Note

1   For different sociologies of life, see Delitz 2015; the articles in Delitz, Nungesser and Seyfert 2018a; for a definition of sociology of life as regarding life as both *subject* and *object* of society, see our introduction (Delitz, Nungesser and Seyfert 2018b); for Plessner, see in particular Fischer 2018; for Bergson, see Seyfert 2018; Delitz 2018.

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10 Pathology and vitality

On the crisis of modern life-forms

Arthur Bueno

Introduction

We live in a time of crisis. Whichever way one conceives of the troubles of the present, it is clear that the forms of life established in the past decades currently face a number of crucial challenges. In such a context, it does not come as a surprise that a variety of social-theoretical discourses focused on the concept of *life* has taken center stage. Today, as in other historical moments, the foregrounding of this notion seems to respond to the perception that wide-ranging processes are in place that put at risk fundamental dimensions of our existence: from our psychological health to our biological survival, from the establishment of just and meaningful social relations to the very reproduction of life on earth. Even if the reliance on such a vocabulary for the purposes of social critique is not exclusive to periods of crisis, these moments can be seen to give particular thrust to interrogations of the present in terms of life-processes: be it by referring to pathological dynamics that threaten (social) life's reproduction, be it by articulating ontologies of (social) life that point to its intrinsic but hindered potentials.

Yet it is not uncommon that these two ways of responding to the crisis come to be set against each other. Indeed, as we face the dangers and uncertainties of the present, a new instantiation of this debate has surfaced. On the one hand, the diagnosis of social pathologies became in recent years a major strand within Frankfurt School critical theory. The pathological aspects of social life have been taken, then, to consist in experiences of suffering associated with socially caused threats to the subjects' self-realization; in systematic misinterpretations of underlying norms that result in restrictions to freedom; or in the dysfunctional interplay between the institutional spheres of a social organism (Honneth 1994, 2004, 2011, 2014; cf. Zurn 2011; Freyenhagen 2015; Bueno 2017; Laitinen and Särkelä 2019). Their differences notwithstanding, these conceptions converge in that they take social pathologies to consist in disturbances of the way our lives are normatively shaped. They all point, in one way or another, to forms of systematic disarray between dimensions of social life that are supposed to be structured in a more or less cohesive, well-ordered, harmonious manner: subjects and their social relations, first- and second-order beliefs, or the institutional spheres of society. Thus conceived, the critique of social pathologies involves addressing the ways in

which social life comes to be affected by this or that kind of normative *indeterminacy*, that is, the lack of a proper determinate form (Honneth 2001; cf. also Jaeggi 2013). Understanding itself as a continuation of the project of Enlightenment, such an approach aims at providing order to a life that has become dysfunctional through the disconnect of its constitutive parts. In this regard, the critical theorist proceeds (negatively) by contrasting the normative conditions of a given form of life with its insufficient or inappropriate realizations.

Such a mode of critique is, however, opposed by new materialist or neo-vitalist authors (cf. Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012) who, rather than viewing the concept of pathology as a useful critical tool for assessing social ills, regard it as part and parcel of the problem. The very notion of pathology is considered here as a normalizing mechanism that reduces life to a given normative form and in so doing hinders its inherent creativity (cf. Canguilhem 2013 [1966]; Foucault 1972; cf. Greco 2005; Muhle 2008; Delitz 2015). In this perspective, life's dynamism is seen to reside in the complex entanglement of material-vital processes that are neither easily determinable, nor neatly distinguishable as a set of hierarchically disposed elements (e.g., material or immaterial, biological or symbolic, individual or social, nonhuman or human) (cf. Barad 2007; DeLanda 2006; Grosz 2011; Malabou 2015; Massumi 2002). Whereas the critique of social pathologies tends to consider these indeterminate entanglements as indexes of a normative *insufficiency*, those who oppose such a perspective rather see the notion of pathology itself as a way of submitting life to a normative *excess*. A form of life's indeterminacy is not taken here as the sign of a normative dysfunction or lack (i.e., a pathology) but instead as a manifestation of life's irreducible openness and potential surpassing of every fixed form (i.e., its vitality) (cf. Braidotti 2010, 2013; Bennett 2010). In line with radical critiques of Enlightenment, such an approach aims at unraveling the immanent positivity of life: one that lies in its irreducibility to clear-cut functional wholes and to negative dualisms such as the one between the normal and the pathological. The new materialist proceeds, then, by (affirmatively) showing how material-vital processes are involved in "intra-actions" (Barad 2007) so complex and open-ended that they already surpass any attempt to ascribe them a fixed, determinate form.

Each of these theoretical standpoints, when viewed from the perspective of the other, can be taken to overlook not only its conceptual limitations but also its respective political dangers. By conceiving indeterminacy as pathology, critical theory runs the risk of committing itself to the existing order (even while criticizing it) insofar as it underscores the reduction of life to a *pre-given* – if not yet fully realized – form. By viewing indeterminacy as vitality, in turn, new materialism runs the risk of committing itself to the existing order (even while intending to surpass it) inasmuch as it conceives of the latter as *already* open and free. Accordingly, each of these approaches can be deemed unable of accounting for the experience of the crisis. If for the critical theorist the crisis consists in the erosion of normative forms, the claims for formless vitality that emerge in that context cannot but appear as themselves pathological and irrational. The creative and open-ended dimension of such a moment may be dismissively viewed as a

mere disruption to be overcome by the (re-)establishment of a (proper) normative order. In new materialist accounts, precisely the latter aspect takes center stage: the crisis tends to appear here as an outburst of creative vitality emerging in the space opened up by the collapse of established norms. Yet not seldom the emphasis on the positivity of such a moment entails a disregard for the destructive potentials unleashed by it.

What is staged here is, hence, an opposition between two general conceptions of (social) life: while critical theory's standpoint can be characterized as one of *normativity without vitality*, the new materialist approach can be regarded as one of *vitality without normativity*. Both perspectives point to important dimensions of the troubles we currently face; and yet, as their mutual criticisms show, each of them also contains significant shortcomings. In this regard, a reassessment of Georg Simmel's diagnosis of modernity may be particularly fruitful. His writings move precisely in the space in-between these two theoretical lineages: having developed a diagnosis of the pathologies of modern life-*forms*, Simmel also understood the crisis engendered by such a process in terms of an outburst of *life*. This has led him to be seen both as a forerunner of Frankfurt School critical theory and as a philosopher of life (cf. Blumenberg 1976; Habermas 1983; Honneth 1994, 2002; Fitzi 2002; Bleicher 2007; Bueno 2018). Due to the double-edged nature of Simmel's work, one can find in it not only a tense dialogue between these two perspectives but also an indication of how they can be brought together in a complex view of the pathologies and crises of modern life-forms.

With this in mind, this chapter will proceed in two main steps. First, I will show how Simmel developed a critique of the social pathologies – in a way similar to the one articulated by recent critical theory – which brings into view the internal inconsistencies of modern forms of life. Such a critique relies on the assumption of a homology between modern life-forms and the money-form: the analysis of money's inherent contradictions can thus reveal how different types of (economic and non-economic) action may come to be entangled in unresolved contradictions. In *The Philosophy of Money*, these pathological dynamics were presented as ultimately inescapable; yet in Simmel's late writings – addressed in the last section of this chapter – two attempts to move beyond such a contradictory structure were considered. The experiences of the crisis and the war were seen, then, to consist in efforts to overcome the formal contradictions of modernity through the experience of an immediate, overflowing vitality. While both attempts could appear as liberating with regard to the pathologies of modernity (something that is mostly out of question for recent critical theory), they also can be shown to contain dangers of their own (an aspect that is often not accounted for by new materialist approaches).

Dialectics of modern life-forms

The diagnosis of the social pathologies of modernity is a central aspect of Simmel's oeuvre. Already in his first writings, he elaborated an analysis of modern life focused on the connection between large-scale processes epitomized by the

development of the money economy and types of psychological malaise broadly conceived of as "neurasthenic" – that is, marked by an ongoing oscillation between urgency and exhaustion, saturation and insufficiency, "hyperesthesia" and "anesthesia" (Simmel 1992 [1896]: 214; cf. Bueno 2013, 2018). As Simmel conceived them, these pathological dynamics consisted in "paradoxical" or "self-contradictory" disturbances of life-forms displayed with particular intensity in the realm of action (Simmel 1997 [1908]: 44; 1997 [1911–12]: 66). The malaises of modernity were then viewed as resulting from a process of "colonization of ends by means" (Simmel 1997 [1896]: 250): due to the development of institutions (i.e., means for action) through which a growing number of purposes can be ever more indirectly achieved, our chains of action have become so extended and our final goals so mediated and distant that the latter sink away from consciousness. As a consequence, we come to concentrate our effort upon the immediately present means, which may gain autonomous significance and become itself an ultimate end. The more intricate and elaborate the technique of all domains of life becomes, "the greater [the] danger is of getting stuck in the labyrinth of means and thereby forgetting the ultimate goal" (ibid.: 250–1).

Such a process affects the whole of modern culture, but has become especially prominent in the money economy, so that its affective implications are made particularly visible in certain "manic" economic behaviors:

> It is interesting, therefore, to see how this psychological interruption of the teleological series appears not only in direct greed and miserliness, but also in its apparent opposite, the pleasure in simply spending money as such. . . . Herein are the stages of the teleological process: the rational ultimate goal is, indeed, only the enjoyment from the use of the object; the means to it are: first, that one has money, second that one spends it, and third that one possesses the object. Purposive consciousness can stop at any one of these three stages and constitute it as an end in itself; and in fact, so forcibly, that each of its three components can degenerate into manias.
>
> (Simmel 1997 [1889]: 235)

For Simmel, economic attitudes such as greed, miserliness and squandering are thus crucial for understanding the problematic features of modernity: in them, it becomes clear how the colonization of ends by means may give rise to that oscillation between saturation and insufficiency that he characterized with the notion of neurasthenia. So much so that the analysis of these "hypertrophied" or "pathological" behaviors – as Simmel later designated them – was to become a central part of *The Philosophy of Money*, a book whose aim was nothing less than to provide a philosophical account of the "totality of life" (Simmel 2004 [1900/07]: 53, 239, 242). If it seemed possible to accomplish such an ambitious task through an analysis of the money-form, it is because life was itself viewed as defined by a certain form: namely, one marked by the involvement of all particularities of the world in a shifting network of reciprocal effects (*Wechselwirkungen*). Precisely this would provide "the possibility . . . of finding in each of life's details

the totality of its meaning" (ibid.): given that all particularities are reciprocally intertwined, one could start with any of them and explore its connections with the others so as to progressively obtain an image of the whole, moving from the "surface of existence" to "the ultimate decisions concerning the meaning and style of life" (Simmel 1997 [1903]: 177).

In principle, then, such an approach could dedicate itself to any specific element of life. Yet for Simmel money presented an object especially well-suited to such an endeavor. Being "indifference itself, in that its entire purposive significance does not lie in itself but rather in its transformation into other values", money consists in the most "superficial and insubstantial" of all elements and, at the same time, the most effective bearer of the *Wechselwirkungen* one must unfold in order to approach the "inner substance of life" (Simmel 2004 [1900/07]: 53). Implied here is a homological relation between money-form and life-form: money provides a "symbol of [life's] essential forms of movement" (ibid.) inasmuch as it consists in the form in which the two poles of superficiality and substantiality most radically oppose each other and, at the same time, where they most closely meet. Simmel's analysis of modern life-forms is thus dialectical in a crucial sense: it relies on the notion that life, when considered through the lenses of the money-form, finds its most significant expression where its oppositions reach a peak, where they present themselves as unresolved contradictions. This is what *The Philosophy of Money*, in each of its different parts, offers: an image of life in the form of a "dialectics without reconciliation" (Landmann 1968: 16).

It is on the basis of such a philosophical perspective that Simmel reformulates his diagnosis of modernity. The process of colonization of ends by means is now grasped, dialectically, as the unfolding of a central tension inherent to the *form* of human action: that is, the tension between the "relativity of our aspirations" and "the absoluteness of the idea of final purpose" (Simmel 2004 [1900/07]: 236). On the one hand, we are driven by an infinite series of purposes that can never reach a standstill: "no gain or condition attained grants us the final satisfaction which is logically bound up with the concept of an ultimate purpose" (ibid.). Our aspirations are, in this sense, inescapably *relative*. At the same time, while acting we cannot avoid designating "one moment as the ultimate end, for which everything preceding it is only a means" (ibid.). Even if a final purpose in the sense of something attainable does not exist, in each of our practical endeavors we cannot but strive for something *absolute*. The notion of ultimate end operates then as a "regulative principle": a prospect never attained but always present, as the horizon in relation to "the earthly paths that always lead towards it, yet which, after the longest wanderings, never seem to be any closer than at the outset" (ibid.).

Now, the tension between these two poles can be seen to reach its peak in the money-form. Being an equivalent of the value of potentially everything, money presents the most accomplished crystallization of the notion of absolute end: it promises enjoyment (*Genuß*) in the sense of an undifferentiated state of fulfillment, a condition that "is not yet, or is no longer, affected by the contrast between [a desiring] subject and [a desired] object" (ibid.: 62–3). Yet, at the same time, money has no inherent purpose and consists thereby in the most relative means

we know of: despite its promise of ultimate fulfillment, it always comes to restate the distance between subject and object and thus to re-instantiate desire. This is why Simmel could take the money-form as a "symbol of [life's] essential forms of movement": insofar as it leads the opposition between the *relativity of desire* and the *absoluteness of enjoyment* to a point of maximum tension, money reveals most radically the antinomic structure of modern life-forms.

Pathologies of action

It is from such a standpoint that Simmel now returns to those actions that were previously described as "manic". In monetary attitudes such as greed, avarice and squandering, as well as in seemingly non-monetary behaviors such as ascetic poverty, cynicism and the blasé attitude, one can find different ways of dealing with the tension between the "relativity of our aspirations" and "the absoluteness of the idea of final purpose". Each of them reveals, in different form, the teleological contradictions of money as well as the psychological consequences of the advancement of the money economy in modernity.

   The first cases addressed by Simmel in his typology of pathological behaviors are greed and avarice. Both are grasped initially as instantiations of a "remarkable psychological mania for accumulation" that is also manifested, for example, in the behavior of individuals who "pile up precious collections of any kind without getting any satisfaction from the objects themselves" (ibid.: 239). What appears here as valuable is not the object in its specific quality – the "subjective reflex" associated to its use – but the simple "objective fact" of its acquisition and possession, that is, a certain form of "supra-subjective" relationship between the owner and the owned (ibid.: 240–1). Now, such a drive toward mere objective accumulation may surface even more intensely when the object involved is itself defined by a tendency toward abstraction:

> The abstract character of money, its remoteness from any specific enjoyment in and for itself, supports an objective delight in money. . . . The miser loves money as one loves a highly admired person who makes us happy simply by his existence. . ., without our relation to him as an individual taking the form of concrete enjoyment.
>
> (ibid.: 242)

For the greedy and the miser, money presents thereby the possibility of an "abstract form of enjoyment which, none the less, is not enjoyed" (ibid.: 243). This is premised on the specific manner in which two opposite features of potentiality are combined in the monetary means. While a potential already implies a certain given state ("whoever 'can' play the piano, even if he does not do so, is different from someone who is unable to do so"), it is also inherently characterized by a moment of uncertainty: "this state of ability . . . leads to the realisation of what can be done only by meeting with further conditions whose occurrence we are unable to predict" (ibid.). In money, as experienced by the greedy and the

miser, these two dimensions of potentiality are intensified and come to achieve their most extreme opposition to one another. Money is an "absolute *capacity*", that is, nothing but potential. Here the present owes all its meaning to the future to come: different than what occurs in other capacities, money is *absolutely nothing* without its actualization. Yet money is also an "*absolute* capacity" – that is, the most effective potential. It can be potentially concretized in *absolutely everything*, so that "the degree of certainty that it will materialise at the right moment" is much more comprehensive than in other capacities (ibid.). By holding unto money without spending it, the greedy and the miser experience these two aspects at once: they sense the infinite possibilities money provides even while leaving them "as yet completely untouched" (ibid.). That psychological mania for accumulation takes here the form of an enjoyment that is *unlimited* precisely because it is *never realized*. This explains why the search for "objective delight" in the acquisition or possession of money may give rise to a neurasthenic oscillation between feelings of saturation and insufficiency: while promising unlimited possibilities for enjoyment, money does not contain in itself any concrete enjoyment.

As the experiences of the greedy and the miser demonstrate, the attempt to establish money as an actual absolute purpose cannot but fail. Now the question arises as to where "the absoluteness of the idea of final purpose" could find a new ground. This is a problem that will be, as it were, bequeathed to the squanderer. Acknowledging money's relativity, he seeks for an absolute purpose precisely in the next stage of the teleological sequence, that is, expenditure:

> When Prince Conti sent a diamond valued at 4,000–5,000 francs to a lady and it was returned to him, he ordered it to be crushed so that he might use it as writing sand for the letter he wrote to her in reply. Taine adds to this story the following remark about the conventions of that period: "The less one cares about money, the more a man of the world one is".
>
> (ibid.: 249)

As this example indicates, the spendthrift looks for something that is at first sight opposite to what is aimed by the greedy and the miser: instead of seeking an absolute purpose in the appropriation of a valued object, he does so by *disposing* it and thus setting himself both *apart* from and *above* such a thing. Now, the implications of such an act can only be intensified when it is directed not simply to an equivalent of value but to the bearer of abstract value itself, that is, money: "the indifference towards money value . . . constitutes the essence and attraction of extravagance". And yet, as Taine's story indicates, such an indifference "presupposes . . . money value as something experienced and appreciated; for, obviously, throwing away what is indifferent would itself be completely indifferent" (ibid.). The spendthrift's own value can only be affirmed on the condition that he assumes that what is being squandered possesses great value: "the conscious and emphatic negative attitude towards money is based – as in a dialectical process – on its opposite, which alone can give it significance and attraction" (ibid.).

This brings his experience closer to that of the greedy and the avaricious, despite their apparent opposition. Just as in greed and avarice the affirmation of money value becomes an end in itself detached from any concrete enjoyment, in squandering the negation of money value is converted into an absolute purpose whatever the concrete results of such an endeavor: "instead of seeking out the enjoyment of real entities", which are by definition limited, they look "for the intangible, which extends to the infinite and has no external or internal reasons for its restriction" (ibid.: 250). These behaviors are all marked by a peculiar *Maßlosigkeit* – a lack of moderation, a boundlessness, a tendency to move beyond any reasonable measure. Yet, in squandering, money's inherent tensions are no longer expressed in a contradictory relation between potentiality and actuality, but rather in one between *necessity* and *superfluity*. The more an object appears to us as necessary, Simmel says, the more the desire for it is felt as urgent but also as limited. In turn, something superfluous is experienced as less urgent but also as unlimited. Money combines the maximum of these two poles: it is the most indispensable object since it provides the means for the most basic needs of life; yet it is also the most dispensable object for, in itself, it cannot satisfy any necessity. To that extent, money associates the *intense urgency* of the most basic needs with the *extensive unlimitedness* of the most superfluous desires. It gives rise, then, to the paradoxical experience of an urgent need that cannot be satisfied, a luxury that nevertheless appears as indispensable. This leads, again, to a neurasthenic experience that oscillates between feelings of saturation and insufficiency:

> The spendthrift is indifferent towards the object once he possesses it; his enjoyment is doomed never to find repose and permanency. . . . In this respect, life has the same demonic form as for the avaricious: every goal attained arouses a thirst for more which can never be satisfied.
>
> (ibid.: 251)

The greedy, the miser and the squanderer hence remain within the circle of influence of money and its inherent contradictions. Yet the spendthrift is distinguished by the fact that he already intends to move beyond the monetary means, even if such an attempt is doomed to fail. Now there is a figure that takes such negation of money to a further degree; one that seeks not merely to devalue it but also to counteract it with a definite ideal: "poverty as a positive value, poverty in itself as a self-satisfying purpose of life" (ibid.: 252). For Simmel, such a stance only gains its full meaning in the context of an advanced money economy. The more the latter expands, the more the monetary means may appear as a "dangerous temptation", the more asceticism has to acquire resolute forms:

> Because [money] is ready to be used at any moment, it is the worst snare of a moment of weakness, and since it serves all activities, it offers the soul its most tempting aspect at that time. . . . Hence for ascetic modes of sensibility

it becomes the real symbol of the devil who seduces us under the mask of innocence and simplicity.

<div align="right">(ibid.: 254)</div>

The most radical example of such a conduct, says Simmel, was provided by the early Franciscan friars. For them, poverty was not simply a means for the salvation of the soul, but an *end in itself*:

> Poverty was already quite clearly one side or expression of the fact that the world belongs, in a higher and supreme sense, to he who renounces; he *does not really renounce*, but rather in poverty he possesses the purest and finest extract of things, just as the avaricious possesses the same in money.
>
> <div align="right">(ibid.: 255; emphasis added)</div>

Paradoxically, the conversion of poverty into an absolute purpose seemed to imply that such an act lost its ascetic nature: poverty no longer consisted simply in a condition for the salvation of the soul, but rather presented its immediate fulfillment and enjoyment. Yet, at the same time, such a behavior was defined by a radical form of asceticism and renunciation. The Franciscans' motto – *nihil habentes, omnia possidentes* – expresses in the clearest manner the contradiction inherent to the elevation of poverty to an ultimate purpose: definitive possession is sought precisely in the continuous abstention from all possession. The radical renunciation of the one who does not really renounce hence mirrors that abstract form of enjoyment that is not enjoyed. Poverty as a moral ideal displays the same contradictory structure of the monetary means, only in an inverted form; it attests, instead of refusing, the latter's power. Here, as before, life takes on a "demonic form" inasmuch as every renounced goal "arouses a thirst for more [renunciation] which can never be satisfied" (ibid.: 251).

   This poses an important problem, which will be taken up by the next figure in Simmel's typology. The acknowledgment that even a value that seemed entirely opposite to money – poverty as an ideal – relies on the assumption of the latter's absolute value leads to a relativization not only of that ideal but potentially of all particular values. Such is the position defended by modern cynicism, which, Simmel argues, is remarkably different from the Greek philosophy from which the term originates. While ancient cynicism deemed all distinctions between higher and lower values to be irrelevant, this stance did not lead to the abolition of value but was rather premised on the affirmation of "an entirely positive ideal in life: the unconditional strength of the soul and the ethical freedom of the individual". In comparison with the latter, all other ideals would pale into insignificance and "precisely in their indifference the existence of this absolute value would be revealed" (ibid.: 256). For the modern cynic, however, such a positive ideal has vanished:

> In the attitude which we nowadays characterise as cynical, it seems to me decisive that here too . . . the only significance of what is highly valued

consists in its being degraded to the lowest level, but that the positive and ideal ethical purpose of this levelling has disappeared.

(ibid.)

This description might make it seem that modern cynicism is constituted by a purely negative moment. But things are not exactly so. Modern cynicism refuses the *difference* between values, but not the *existence* of value: "the cynic is still moved to a reaction by the sphere of value, even if in the perverse sense that he considers the downward movement of values part of the attraction of life" (ibid.: 257). Some notion of the absolute is retained here, even if in the very reduced form of a mere confirmation – through the debasement of all particular values – that value still exists. Such is the contradiction inherent to modern cynicism: it affirms the existence of a value sphere at the same time – and precisely *to the extent* – that it brings about a leveling of all differences between values.

Yet this relativization of the differences between particular values can lead to the conclusion that things in themselves have no value at all. This is the position of the blasé person, who takes such leveling even further than the modern cynic: "He experiences all things as being of an equally dull and grey hue, as not worth getting excited about" (ibid.: 257). Unlike the cynic, who still finds an "attraction of life" and "a definite pleasurable sensation" in the devaluation of everything, the blasé person no longer allows himself to be moved by anything. More than just leveling the differences between values (*Verschiedenwertigkeit*), he is indifferent to the differences in the nature of things themselves (*Verschiedenartigkeit der Dinge*), and is thus robbed from "the whole liveliness of feeling and volition" (ibid.).

In the blasé attitude, the "negativity of the teleological sequence" thus reaches a peak. Here the "absoluteness of the idea of final purpose" seems to have vanished, leading to a radical form of meaninglessness in which "all possibilities of attraction are destroyed" (ibid.: 258). Yet the blasé attitude has, in fact, its own form of absolute purpose: once it is no longer possible to find an "attraction of life" in the sphere of value, the individual may seek it in the mere quantitative increase in excitement. Here "the relativity of our aspirations" has acquired an unprecedented extension and "the absoluteness of the idea of final purpose" has been reduced to the search for mere stimulation in things, "without thinking it important for us to find out why these stimulate us" (ibid.). The oscillation between anesthesia and hyperesthesia takes on thereby its most acute form:

> Out of this there emerges the craving today for excitement, for extreme impressions, for the greatest speed in its change. . . . The satisfaction of such cravings may bring about a temporary relief, but soon the former condition will be re-established, though now made worse by the increased quantity of its elements. . . . A money culture signifies such an enslavement of life in its means, that release from its weariness is also evidently sought in a mere means which conceals its final significance – in the fact of "stimulation" as such.

(ibid.: 258–9)

Crisis and vitality

As presented in *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel's analysis of the pathologies of modernity reaches its culminating point in the experience of the blasé person. In the latter, the "demonic form" of modern culture has seemingly reached its apex: things and persons appear as meaningless objects that can only move the individual through mere quantitative increases in stimulation. And yet, in later writings Simmel pursued this diagnosis one step further. In the following decade, and with particular thrust during the 1914 War, he came to view the intensification of those pathological processes as leading to the outburst of a wide-ranging crisis. The tensions inherent to modern life-forms had reached such a degree that they erupted into open conflict and revealed themselves, more clearly than before, as pathological. The crisis gave "both inner and outer reality to those rifts which were inherent to the structure of our relations but were not actualized" (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 94). Yet due to the same process, this was also a moment in which the pathologies of modernity were radically put into question. The outburst of oppositions demanded "from each and every man a *decision* as to where he ultimately stands" and was thereby the occasion for a number of countertendencies to emerge (ibid.: 95; emphasis added). In reaction to a world of objective forms so rigid and contradictory that it appeared "like exhausted soil, which has yielded all it can but which is still entirely covered with the products of its earlier fertility", attempts were made both to negate such a state and to move beyond it (ibid.: 77).

For Simmel this historical moment was, in that regard, a particularly radical one. While in previous crises "old forms have always been destroyed by a desire for new forms. . . [which] in a way were already prefigured", the pathologies of modernity had then intensified to such a degree that it was "no longer a question of a new cultural form struggling against an old, but of life, in every imaginable sphere, rebelling against the need to contain itself within any fixed form at all" (ibid.: 77, 80). In the face of an utterly meaningless world (as the latter had come to appear to the blasé person), it could seem as if there was nothing left but to respond in an equally drastic manner: Simmel describes how cultural movements of all sorts were then driven by efforts to *relativize* "the principle of form as such", to oppose "form simply because it is form" (ibid.). And yet, by doing so they also intended to pave the way for something *absolute*, something beyond form: life.

Expressionism, for instance, radically refused to ground the work of art in the submission to "a form imposed upon it . . . which is only available to the artist from some external source: tradition, technique, a model or an established principle". Yet with such a move it aimed at nothing else than to remove "obstructions to life, whose urge is to pour out spontaneously and creatively" (ibid.: 80–1). Similarly, the turn to mystical religiosity was motivated by a longing for "freedom from the clear contours and boundaries of religious forms", meaning above all the search for "an indefinite expansiveness of religious emotion, . . . given profundity in a formless infinity" (Simmel 1997 [1918]: 87, 89). What these and other movements aimed at was therefore to escape the pathologies of modernity through the experience of a *formless, indeterminate, immediate life*: that is, "a continuity at

that profound level where life has not yet split into needs and satisfactions and thus requires no object which would impose a specific form upon it" (ibid.: 88–9). They sought, in other words, for an absolute that money had promised but could not deliver: *enjoyment* as a condition that "is not yet, or is no longer, affected by the contrast between subject and object" (Simmel 2004 [1900/07]: 62–3).

Yet such an attempt could not but fail. After all, "spiritual life can . . . only become articulate in forms; its freedom likewise can only be actualized in forms, even though they also immediately restrict that freedom" (Simmel 1997 [1918]: 89). What came to fruition in those movements was a "purely negative critique that misunderstands itself" (ibid.). The experience of the crisis is thus marked by a *tense indeterminacy*: insofar as one seeks to revitalize modern forms by resorting to the immediacy of life (which, however, could only be attained by the refusal of every formal mediation), one ends up refusing the possibility of any determinate expression of life and, thereby, the possibility of life itself. In a sense, then, such an experience represents not an overcoming but a further stage of the social pathologies of modernity. In the crisis, one looks for the absolutely vital in the contact with an immediate reality that, however, cannot be achievable without some kind of formal mediation. Experience finds itself, once again, involved in a "demonic" oscillation between irreconcilable opposites: the repeatedly frustrated search for an immediate expression of life, on the one hand, and the return to forms that appear nevertheless worn out, on the other.

Another instantiation of this problem, as well as a different response to it, surfaced in the 1914 War. The affirmation of "the power of life purely *qua* life because it is life" (Simmel 1997 [1917]: 90) was then pursued with even greater radicality – not through cultural movements but on the battlefield. The soldier, Simmel says, felt "an enormous increase in the quantity of life . . . and to be in more direct proximity to its surging dynamism than he is able to feel in his usual working activities" (ibid.: 93). But a more decisive affirmation of the immediacy of life took place collectively. Also at a national level, social tendencies of all sorts were

> suffused with a passionate vitality [*Lebendigkeit*] bursting forth as if from one common source of energy. . . . The unprecedented enhancement and excitement in the lives of each and every one of us has also promoted this fusion, this coming together in one single stream.
>
> (ibid.: 99–100)

In both these regards, the war had thus seemed to indicate a possible reconciliation between life and form:

> [The war gave] a new dynamic impetus [*Bewegtheit*] to the objective elements of culture, and thus new scope and encouragement [for them] to become reintegrated, to break out of that rigidity and insularity which had turned our culture into a chaos of disjointed individual elements devoid of any common style.
>
> (ibid.: 100)

Unlike previous attempts to affirm life in its immediate continuity, the war seemed for Simmel (as for many of his contemporaries) to allow for the emergence of a fusional vitality, "a common source of energy", that would find place and expression in a cohesive form, a "common style". The horizon projected by the war is, in this sense, nothing other than that of an indeterminate enjoyment that would be articulated into a determinate and unified form. Yet such an endeavor came with an obvious price. The prospect of establishing a wholly unitary form in accordance with an amalgamating life-stream could not but be premised on the subjugation, and ultimately the elimination, of every heterogeneous element. Hence the intrinsically (self-)destructive nature of this attempt to resolve the pathologies of modern culture: the effort to constitute a "common style" (as promised e.g. by the idea of the nation) in correspondence to a "single [life-]stream" ends up undermining the very principle of form, which is ultimately based in the heterogeneity between subject and object.

This experience thus also comes to be entangled in a "dialectics without reconciliation". One seeks here for an absolute in a fusional vitality that would allow for the articulation of a form dominant or violent enough to eliminate every heterogeneous element that puts its unity at risk. And yet, the vitality and dynamism sought for in such an experience cannot but come from that very heterogeneity. It is not by chance that Simmel so often characterizes life by referring to liquid metaphors: life "flows" (*fließst*), "floods" (*gießst*), "streams" (*strömst*). Without heterogeneity – even if coming from quasi-indeterminate waves of unclear boundaries – there can be no movement, only stasis. This makes the task of unification not only permanent but infinite: one must continue to amalgamate and destroy in order to re-establish, again and again, the unity of that form. One would only stop when there is no longer form and, therefore, no longer life. The war represents the ultimate attempt to escape from the pathologies of modern forms of life, and yet it ends up intensifying the latter's "demonic form" to the point of self-destruction. It reveals itself, like all previous pathological figures, dependent on the contradictory structure of money as the "symbol of [life's] essential forms of movement". Its ultimate aim is to attain and give form to an indeterminate state of absolute enjoyment (as the one promised by money); yet it reveals (as money also does) how that only becomes possible at the price of a continual destruction of life itself.

Conclusion

As we saw, Simmel developed throughout his work a diagnosis of the social pathologies and crises of modernity on the basis of an analysis of monetary and non-monetary attitudes and their inherent contradictions. Each of these behaviors presents a specific instantiation of the wide-ranging process of colonization of ends by means, responding each time differently to the tension between desire and enjoyment, that is, between "the relativity of our aspirations" and "the absoluteness of the idea of final purpose".

For the greedy and the avaricious, that tension appears as one between *potentiality and actuality*: they look for the absolutely actual in the acquisition or possession of a potential (e.g., money) that cannot, however, be actualized. In squandering, such an actualization does take place; money is spent and converted into something else. Yet the tension remains, now taking the form of an opposition between *superfluity and necessity*: the spendthrift looks for the absolutely necessary in the dissipation of a superfluous object (e.g., money) that cannot, however, be dispensed with. For the ascetic poor, money is not something that can be disposed of; it rather appears as an evil or dangerous object that should be morally renounced for the sake of religious salvation. His experience is hence marked by a tension between *renunciation and redemption*: he looks for absolute redemption in the renunciation of something (e.g., money) that cannot, however, be fully renounced. While the modern cynic does not renounce, he devalues that which he comes to possess. His experience is marked by a tension between *leveling and distinction*: he looks for absolute distinction in the leveling of all particular values (e.g., through money), and this, however, cannot but lead to the leveling of value distinctions themselves. The blasé person, in turn, abstains from the search for distinction; he is indifferent toward value itself and hence toward the qualitative differences among things. His experience is marked by a tension between *indifference and stimulation*: he looks for absolute stimulation in sheer impressions made by objects whose specific qualities are, however, indifferent to him (as they are to money).

One reaches thereby a crucial stage in the pathologies of culture, namely, a point in which the latter's contradictions become so intense that they lead to the outburst of a crisis. In this situation, an attempt might be made to move beyond those meaningless forms (as they appeared to the blasé person) by refusing the principle of form itself and trying to reach life in its immediacy. Once again, this leads to a "dialectics without reconciliation". Yet involved here is no longer a formal contradiction, as in the previous instantiations of the pathologies of culture, but a contradiction between form and life, between *mediation and immediacy*: the person in crisis looks for absolute immediacy in a lived experience that cannot, however, dispense with the mediation of forms (as it also occurs with the money-form). Finally, the war provides an ultimate attempt to escape the "demonic form" of modern culture. Instead of looking for a formless living immediacy, one rather seeks then to articulate the unity of life in terms of an equally unitary form. A novel contradiction thus arises, namely one between *destruction and fusion*: the individual at war seeks for absolute formal unity in the fusional experience of a collective vitality that, however, can only be attained by the destruction of all heterogeneous element, of all form, and therewith of all life (as money, taken to its logical extreme, also tends to do).

Reconsidered in these terms, Simmel's diagnosis of modernity thus situates itself halfway between the two approaches to life-processes proposed by contemporary critical theory and new materialisms. His analysis of social pathologies shares with critical theory the notion that a form of life becomes problematic when it is affected by internal formal inconsistencies. Contrary to more recent approaches, however, Simmel's writings do not simply assume the reestablishment

of an adequate normative order as a solution to this problem. On the contrary, they indicate how the pathologies of modern life-forms bring forth strong longings for the experience of an immediate, indeterminate, formless vitality. Such tendencies are not simply irrational; they contain a positive, liberating aspect – and this brings Simmel's view closer to that proposed by new materialisms. Yet, unlike the latter, his analysis shows not only the insufficiency of such a horizon but also its dangers: the potentially destructive character of such an experience emerges to the extent that – as he saw occur in the war – one seeks to provide such a vitality with a unitary and total form. While such a perspective does not yet provide a way out of the "dialectics without reconciliation" of modern life-forms (something that Simmel would pursue in his last book, *The View of Life* [2010 [1918]]), it already points to such a prospect insofar as it puts into dialogue, pitting one against the other, those two reactions to the crisis of life-processes: the critique of pathology and the ontology of vitality.

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Part 3

Critique in/of New Materialism

11 Doing justice to that which matters

Subjectivity and the politics of New Materialism

Rick Dolphijn

Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless
successions of diseas'd corpses,
It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,
It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops,
It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings
from them at last.
Walt Whitman, excerpt from *This Compost*

Introduction: rethinking the subject (and language) after 1968

In France, after the student riots of 1968, the ways in which critical thinking was reinventing itself were much concerned with the setting up of new theories of the subject. The unrest that had occupied the city for months showed a deep dissatisfaction with the way post-war society had developed itself or rather had managed to keep its 19th-century structures intact, which was much to the dislikes of the baby boom generation (most of whom were born right after the end of World War II). The often implicit but all too clear hierarchies, whose sharp distinctions seemed impossible to even discuss, not just dominated the universities of the so-called "free world", in the end they were active within the capillaries of society *as a whole*. Capitalism had swiftly ended the rigid economically untouchable status of nobility in France, as Marcel Proust showed us so beautifully, but the highly refined structures of society (including its class structures, its sexism, its racism, its colonialism) did survive both World Wars. Obviously, much to the displeasure of the young.

Within French academia, it was especially with feminism and postcolonial theory that the Humanism implicit in critical thinking became more and more problematic. Authors like Kristeva, Glissant and Foucault (2008) noticed that in a variety of ways the "man" central to Humanism was not as innocent as Descartes and Kant made us believe. This "man", that implicitly and explicitly became the protagonist of philosophy, had always been male, had always been white, was at

least upper middle class and living in the city. In Kant's days, when he was talking of "the citizen" as his "figure of thought", this white male was also in the position of not having to work for his money, but of course, especially after World War I (as already mentioned earlier), that had to become less of an issue. Nevertheless, it is fair to conclude that this "man", (at least) since Kant, was a political construction created in the image of those in power. "Man" was a "Vitruvian Man", after Leonardo da Vinci's example, that found himself at the very center of the universe, at the center of power and that, for instance, always already echoed masculinity, whiteness but also heteronormativity, in everything expressed.

Critiquing this center of power, warding it off in many ways and searching affirmatively for new subject positions that would be more inclusive, that would accept some sort of equality on the one hand and difference on the other, became central to how the humanities and the social sciences evolved after 1968. Scholars began exploring a myriad of subjectivities, with long histories and emergent histories, claiming a notion of selfhood or refusing to be identified according to existing standards (nomad subjectivities, as Rosi Braidotti (1994) tends to call them). Perhaps this exploration of (possible) subjectivities came to full growth with the rise of Cultural Studies in the 1990s. Very much building upon discourse analyses, as practiced, for example, by the aforementioned Michel Foucault, many subject positions were explored and analyzed mostly through the sign systems in which they functioned. Linguistic theory and the way this had already worked itself into psychoanalysis and social theory (through the work of Jacques Lacan and the early Roland Barthes) now became key to studying everyday life and the way in which identity formation was part of that. Especially scholars like Stuart Hall were of the belief that a cultural concept like "race" was in the end an "empty signifier", not based on any biological difference, at work purely as a linguistic construction.

Although there are not too many people, even today, who do not accept the (constructed) narratives of race that Hall showed to us, the (Saussurian) theories of language at the basis of his thinking are now more and more replaced by a more materialist analysis of phenomena like race (think of the work of Arun Saldanha 2006). In feminism too, we see that gender performativity, as studied by scholars like Judith Butler, is more and more questioned (think of the work of Claire Colebrook 2008). The interstices of language, while they can count on Butler's special attention, do not seem to satisfy the scholars today. Butler does stress (especially in her more recent work) that new types of signs create these interstices as "appearing through material means" (quoted in Blanton 2007: 135). But then still, the opposition between language and materiality is kept intact. In the end, Butler's quasi materialism does not even tell us how language relates to materiality (it is Cartesian in that sense). This is problematic because, especially in feminist thinking, an emphasis on language inevitably leads us to an emphasis on the categories of gender that have dominated modernity, *id est*, the dualist desire to divide the world into males and females. Hopelessly stigmatizing, categories like "male" and "female" can be varied upon (as it happens within so much of the LGBTQ narratives), but in this critique (and this is the problem with

all critique) the normalities referred to somehow persist in being. In other words, when language tells us to start from the binary opposition "male" and "female", these derivative subjectivities *still* function independently of the material world. Or to put it in Cartesian terms: we still adhere to the Cartesian idea that the *res extensa* (extendedness) is not related to the *res cogitans* (thought) in which the "I" can be found. Ergo, the normalities will persist in being, will return and be critiqued again and again. It's a "Groundhog Day" narrative.

When Rosi Braidotti (1994, 2000), in the 1990s, said that we need some "New Materialism", this was very much in line with her claim that we had to think much more through nomadic subjectivities: subjectivities not determined by sedentary law and that traverse all boundaries *without noticing them*. A New Materialism then calls for abandoning sedentary law, which comes down to, for instance, warding off the dualisms upon which so much of our language-based thinking has depended since modernity. Yet the scholars who have since then focused more on the materialist analysis do not so much do away with language or with sign systems. Rather, they are interested in exploring in what way the role of the subject, and the role of language, need to be rethought from a non-dualist perspective. This means that, perhaps contrary to what a term like "New Materialism" suggests, this type of scholarship should also not just start from the material/matter (as opposed to starting with the mind). Rather than *critiquing* the dualist tradition that we saw with Descartes and Kant and their followers, their monist explorations *alternatively* start from the "relation", as this is seen between the subject and the object, the mind and the body, the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*. This monist tradition has always been a minor tradition in Western thought, but has always offered a radical (non-critical) other voice, very different from the major History of Thought (with capitals) that has dominated the grand narratives of the past two centuries (for more on that, see Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012).

Deleuze on language and on rethinking the relation

Very influential to the rise of New Materialism was Gilles Deleuze, whose ideas, especially after his death, turned out a great inspiration to many in critical thinking. Deleuze had been working closely with Michel Foucault for decades and was acknowledged by Foucault for renewing philosophy radically. By that he meant that Deleuze (his own work and his work with Félix Guattari) should not be read as a "flashy Hegel", by which he meant that Deleuze would have been the new star in the old tradition of transcendental thinking. For even though he always considered himself a Marxist, the politics that Deleuze proposed in no way follow a Hegelian logic. Rather, what Deleuze with his writings practiced was what Foucault called "the non-fascist life" (see the whole argument in the preface in Deleuze and Guattari 1983). The materialism Deleuze practiced was a micropolitics that did not start from a critique of power, but from an affirmation of life. Thus, by taking the monist entanglement of mind and matter, nature and culture, and subject and object as the basis of his practical philosophy, Deleuze warded off

the fascism that proved itself a trap to Marxism (see the current trends in tyranny in the East today).

   Building on what he referred to as a "minor tradition" of Western thought that starts with the Stoics and travels via Spinoza and Nietzsche to Bergson, Deleuze considers the dualism central to linguistic theories of culture – theories in which language (in whatever form) is considered to be the entry point to the study of everything – deeply problematic. In a beautiful passage in *A Thousand Plateaux*, Deleuze (this time with Félix Guattari) summarizes his disagreement with the way in which linguistics had become such an important power in thought after 1968. He states:

> Signifier enthusiasts take an oversimplified situation as their implicit model: word and thing. From the word they extract the signifier, and from the thing a signified in conformity with the word, and therefore subjugated to the signifier. They operate in a sphere interior to and homogeneous to language.
>
>   (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 66)

As already noticed in the preceding paragraph, the main problem with the "signifier enthusiasts" is their inability to escape language and the rules and regulations that their linguistic system projects upon matter. Indeed, as if the material world only shimmers through the logic of language. This then is not so much a critique of Saussure himself, as his "general science of signs" (as he called it) was indeed meant to catch how language *itself* works and not so much how language relates to its outside. Rather than critiquing Saussure, Deleuze (and Guattari, in this case) reject the way Saussure's general science of signs has been put to work outside of linguistics by scholars like Barthes and Lacan (see also Grigg 2008) and those who followed.

   The critique on both is quite explicit. Though Barthes in his later career got much more intrigued by Peirce, his *Elements of Semiology* is a quite straightforward expansion of Saussure's theories, when it claims to study "any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits" (1977: 9). Second, he is interested in how these systems constitute "if not *languages*, at least systems of signification" (idem). Although Deleuze, at least in his writings, does not come back to Barthes' reading of Saussure in particular, Guattari does, and quite ferociously:

> Roland Barthes . . . equates the elements of language and narrative segments with figures of expression, and thus confers on linguistic semiology a primacy over all other semiotics. It was a grave error on the part of the structuralist school to try to put everything connected with the psyche under the control of the linguistic signifier!
>
>   (Guattari 1995: 5)[1]

In *The Logic of Sense*, published by Deleuze early in his career, before his cooperation with Guattari, Deleuze had already given us the answer as to why a

representational connection between a word and a thing, as the early Barthes[2] for instance suggests, makes no sense:

> Because it is not true that the verb represents an action; it expresses an event, which is completely different.
>
> (Deleuze 1969 [1990]: 215)

In other words, language is not the key to understanding or describing an event, language comes *with* events as events come *with* words. They are always already enveloped in one another, *with* the world or, even better, *with* how the world is in constant change. Or to put it more bluntly, language doesn't "mean" anything; it only matters in how it matters.

To illustrate this theory of language, Deleuze and Guattari give the example of the prison and how Michel Foucault studied its 19th-century arrival:

> Let us follow Foucault in his exemplary analysis, which, though it seems not to be, is eminently concerned with linguistics. Take a thing like the prison: the prison is a form, the "prison-form"; it is a form of content on a stratum and is related to other forms of content (schools, barracks, hospital, factory). This thing or form does not refer back to the word "prison", but to entirely different words and concepts, such as "delinquent" and "delinquency", which express a new way of classifying, stating, translating and even committing criminal acts. "Delinquency" is the form of expression in reciprocal presupposition with the form of content "prison". Delinquency is in no way a signifier, even a juridical signifier, the signified of which would be that of the prison. That would flatten the entire analysis.
>
> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 [1980]: 66)

For those not too familiar with the work of Foucault, it should perhaps be added that his historical archaeology and genealogy of the prison focused on how this modern institution became operational in the 19th century. Key to its functioning, as Foucault showed, were the disciplinary processes that revealed themselves in the changing discourses linked with punishment. And it is crucial to note that for Deleuze and Guattari, as for Foucault, the discourse mattered in the relation between words and things. This is what Deleuze and Guattari state in the quotation here, when they claim that the dominant 19th-century prison-*form* (they keep on using Hjelmslev's fourfold *materialist* semiotics that always unfolds in four directions: content, expression, form and substance) is thus linked to an expression like "delinquency" (coming from *delictum*, to fall short), as opposed, for instance, to a presumably similar term like "villain" (that refers to *villanus*, from a village, farmerish). It is not in the direct link between signifier and signified but in the *between* of delinquency and the prison-form (and the book of law, and the rise of capitalism, etc.) that a discourse is spun and a new idea of society (punishment) appears. The practices studied by Foucault show this material history of punishment, in which we see the politics of this clustering at work; we see for instance

that the delinquent needs to be disciplined *back into* society, whereas the villain –
by nature – comes from the outside and needs to be *removed from* society *again*.

Starting thus from how language is enfolded into matter-in-movement (they
are not to be placed opposed to each other, but language is an active part of this
matter-in-movement), Foucault's emphasis on the words *and* the things as a joint
(micropolitical) process, is what Deleuze's materialism is about (see also Lecer-
cle 2002). The analysis of the enunciation and utterance of disciplinary practices
shows how societal change should be analyzed *only* in the mutual presuppositions
of the processes involved, or better even, in the mutual projections and develop-
ments upon which actions anticipate.

New Materialism on matter and what matters

Today, this is what new materialists mean when they focus on how matter comes
to matter. As with Foucault and Deleuze, New Materialism refuses to start from
dualisms (refuses to think in subjects and objects) but rather intends to map the
processes of subjectification and objectification (as well as the many other pro-
cesses that happen with them). Very much interested in themes like race and gen-
der, they do not start from (linguistic) oppositions like male and female, but rather
map in what way they play a role in societal processes in relation to the opposition
between black and white for instance, how they intervene in practices, *diffract*
into different becomings, different futures. But today there is an endless stream of
New Materialisms that go far beyond the paradigms that post-1968 scholarship
had proposed.

Of course, whereas post-1968 scholarship was heavily involved in the politics
of its time, today's scholarship puts new issues on the agenda, issues that might
have played a minor role before but that have today gained important urgency.
The most prominent theme of our time concerns without doubt "the Anthropo-
cene", a term with which Dutch Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen (2002) marks
the times in which humanity is the geological force responsible for fundamental
changes in the bio-sphere, when it is more and more problematic to stick to Mod-
ernist Humanism. Interestingly enough, Crutzen, himself a geologist and chemist
interested in the changing atmosphere, has shown us that human dominance is not
limited to the way technology has alienated itself from natural processes, but also
includes the fact that humanity, in many ways (including social and economic
ones), increasingly opposed itself (Subject) to the world (Object) it intended to
master. Aimed at the continuous speeding up of technology in itself (not taking
into account its relation to the outside world), the modern subject has gone blind
to the matters of the world.

Crutzen confirms the dualism that lies at the heart of the Anthropocene and its
long history in European thought. Dualism, as discussed, is central to what Fou-
cault would consider the condition for our truth: it marks our time and it has done
so throughout modernity (see Foucault 1994 [1966]: ch. 2). At the start of the 20th
century, mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, in his *Science*

and the Modern World, shows us how this dualism was at work long before the Industrial Revolution, via the writings of fellow mathematician and philosopher René Descartes. Analyzing the devastating effects of modern factories and their effect on the (English) landscape, Whitehead already warned us that what Crutzen would later call the Anthropocene follows from a state of mind rather than from individual ideas:

> The general conceptions introduced by science into modern thought cannot be separated from the philosophical situation as expressed by Descartes. I mean the assumption of bodies and minds as independent substances, each existing in its own right apart from any necessary reference to each other.
>
> (Whitehead 1967 [1925]: 194)

Performing the ecological through both science and the humanities, New Materialism therefore shows how fundamentally such dualisms are to be seen as the condition for truth in our times, how they are shaped and how they shape their environment, in other words, how they matter.

A key scholar in new materialist thinking, who shows us neatly how the feminist agenda is *necessarily* entangled with the ecological agenda, is the earlier mentioned Rosi Braidotti. Braidotti's mapping of a new theory of the (nomadic!) subject that surpasses the Kantian Subject (with a capital S) is not to be opposed to the earth but is inextricably entangled with it. And thus, in her work, a new theory of the Subject cannot be considered separately from a critical naturalism. Braidotti insists on a subjectivity that does not so much follow Foucault's earliest writings (*The Order of Things*, as well as his *Introduction* to *Kant's Anthropology* [2008] in which he famously critiques Kant's Subject and the anthropocentrism this entailed) but rather builds upon his last biopolitical analyses: those found in the *History of Sexuality* and in his lectures at the *Collège de France*, which have only recently been published. Rereading Foucault's emphasis on the "care of the self" (as developed in this later work), Braidotti summarizes the pros and cons of a Foucauldian post-humanism in our age:

> The advantage of such a position is that it calls for a higher degree of lucidity about posthuman bio-organic existence, which means that the naturalist paradigm is definitely abandoned. The disadvantage of this position, however, is that it perverts the notion of responsibility towards individualism.
>
> (Braidotti 2013: 116)

The bio-ethical citizenship Braidotti seeks, and that embraces a New Materialism that we also find in the works of Donna Haraway (2007; see Dolphijn 2012) and Karen Barad (2007), instead opts for a type of subjectivity that aims at a sustainable, ecological or relational construction. It is a type of subjectivity that does not demand that the human mind be the "checkpoint" necessary to verify everything there is, upon which post-Kantian thought insisted.

A New Materialism of the earth, a New Materialism of the arts . . .

Manuel DeLanda's (1996, 1997) geological history starts with concrete movements and the interplays of matter-energy through which morphogenesis happens. Not taking consciousness, linguistics or any other humanist systematics as its point of departure, DeLanda radically rethinks the notion of life from the autopoetic systems that happen in the surface of the earth. His various rewritings of the philosophy of science (2013) mix geology, sociology, mathematics and history in analogy with how Deleuze did this and in line with how academics like Antonio Damasio and Simon Conway Morris do this today (see also Duffy 2013). DeLanda's materialism, which he himself now prefers to call a realism, has no interest in privileging the human being at all. Instead, starting from the dynamics of riverbeds, from lava outbursts and thunderstorms, DeLanda leads us back to how the human being, human society and, much more in general, human life (situated in the earthly currents) arises. But it is a kind of "humanity" that we are not too familiar with. His non-anthropocentric view on the economy of the human body tells us that the dynamics of life and the consequences these have for how individual lives take shape, does not intend to save subjectivity (by ending up with a new type of individuality, a new individual). Rather, it sets itself to mapping the material resonances by means of which individuality comes to be – be it organic, inorganic or anorganic.

And thus, in search for how a radically different ecology takes on what humanity is all about, DeLanda notes that 500 million years ago a sudden mineralization intruded the soft tissue or at least cooperated with it. The mineral world became part of life ever since, as an integrated part of its oneness, creating new forms of life previously unknown. A new life should not be reduced to the organic or the anorganic matters from which it came to be. For one, DeLanda notes, "[it] made new forms of movement control possible. . ., freeing them from the constraints and literally setting them [individual living bodies, R.D.] into motion to conquer every available niche in the air, in water and on land" (1997: 26–7). DeLanda thus asks us to study the techniques of existence that traverse the forms of being, humanity being just one of them.

The work of Brian Massumi is in that sense most interesting. Very much inspired by the arts, Massumi searches to map exactly those techniques that are neither human nor nonhuman, yet rather are the same abstractions of nature that Whitehead also sees as the essence of technology.

Massumi recalls a personal conversation with choreographer William Forsythe who stated, "a body is that which folds" (Massumi 2011: 140), which is a perfect example of how such technologies can be analyzed. Forsythe's particular conceptualization (in dance) of the body offered Massumi a starting point to differentiate between contemporary and modern dance. Warding off any emphasis on representation and on the use of metaphors, Forsythe's art offers Massumi a way to get rid of the idea that dancers use their bodies as a means to express an inner feeling. This notion of inner feeling is so prominent in conceptions of modern dance

(Massumi gives the example of Martha Graham's symbolic use of gesture). Contemporary dance, in contrast, expresses pure movement, Massumi states. Thus, whereas in modern dance the body dances (bodily movements create the dance), the dancer in contemporary dance comes to be *in* the dance (movements create a dancing body). An epic example of the latter would be Pina Bausch's "Café Müller" (1985), where the chairs in the café do not surround the dancers creating the mise-en-scène in front of which the dancers dance: the chairs are involved in the dance no less than the dancers. The chairs, the bodies of the dancers and actually everything else make up the raw material from which the dance is abstracted.

But although Forsythe's statement can be used to study dance, it has so much more to tell (of course). Forsythe's definition shows us that contemporary dance overcomes the dualisms that gave form to modernity/modern dance. On the one hand, it has no interest anymore in the opposition between the dancer and the world (which was supposed to be re-presented or danced-to). Contemporary dance does not consider the body "already in existence", filled with potentialities to be realized whenever the situation (the dance) asks it to. On the contrary, the body is actualized in the dance, which means that it is *only* through the act of folding (the dance) that it (the "body", the fold) realizes itself. On the other hand, this means that the folding actualizing a bodily whole is not consequential to Aristotelian memory or another agency from which the body is organized in advance. Rather, the body (including the mind) happens in the fold, which is to say that it is only because of the folding that its unity appears.

Rather than starting from a human body that holds the potentiality to dance (as Aristotle would have it), Forsythe not only starts from movement itself (and how human bodies are engaged in this); he also shows us how dancing happens *always and everywhere* in the folding of the bodies to come, the organic, inorganic and anorganic bodies that express themselves and are given form in the dance. It's interesting to see how a choreographer like Forsythe in the end practices a post-humanism, a system theory or a New Materialism quite in line with how the philosophers and scholars discussed here are rethinking the human. Not making reference to the same sources, not being part of a similar field of study, all of the bright minds discussed here do have in common that they feel most uncomfortable with the Modern Kantian (dualist) ideas that had been defining ourselves and the world around us for so long now. Second, the different materialisms discussed here might start from quite an abstract, perhaps even transcendental (or mathematical) perspective; in the end, they practice a philosophy of nature. Not by choice but by practice they show – contrary to the modernist belief – that theory is a practice and that the act of thinking is always already an intervention in what lies outside of us (the Great Outside).

It is this affirmative approach that we see at work in new materialist theory (from Foucault and Deleuze to Massumi), but also in the contemporary arts (for instance Forsythe), that is able to take us away from anthropocentrism *precisely because* it does not critique. By not accepting Kant's model of thinking (thinking as a response to an outside) but by starting from imagination, from creativity, from the wild, a rethinking of subjectivity, and – much more important – a rethinking of

subjectivity *in nature*, can start immediately. Starting from "that which matters" (in the double sense of the word), New Materialism frees itself from the ruins of modernity and, with the arts, is able to show us the world we have been blind to for so long. The micropolitics of that which matters have a lot to say to us, in times where we humans are more and more confronted with responsibilities for which we need to think beyond the human, beyond what counts as "human knowledge". Obviously, we need every bit of our imagination to imagine the world otherwise.

Notes

1 Deleuze does praise the turn Barthes took in his later work, which he even labeled 'pragmatist': "the path taken by Roland Barthes: he worked on phonology, then on syntax and semantics, but he began more and more to frame his own pragmatics, the pragmatics of an intimate language permeated with circumstances, by events and actions" (Deleuze 1995: 28).
2 I keep stressing that the love from Barthes for Saussure is mainly found in his (more popular) early work. Later in his career, Barthes was much more charmed by the thoughts of Pierce.

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12 Reading after Barad (and Blumenberg)

Diffraction and human agency

Kai Merten

Karen Barad's version of New Materialism, developed mainly in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), connects science, above all quantum physics, and Literary/Cultural Studies. This connection is an important one because it enables Barad to theorize epistemological concerns, such as the perception of the world as a system of signs and codes, together with ontological aspects as related to physics, such as the behavior of molecules and atoms. These two worlds have been routinely kept apart, with Literary/Cultural Theory often insisting on the inaccessibility of any reality outside sign systems, and with scientific scholars on the other hand having little patience for what they see as a fairly comfortably all-inclusive constructivism in Literary/Cultural Theory. Opposed to that separation, Barad insists on the so-called onto-epistemological entanglement of code and matter, of human world and natural world, of perception and being.

Onto-epistemological entanglement, and Barad's further theories connected to this notion, is worthy of being further explored from the perspective of both sides: to Literary and Cultural Studies, it makes, literally, think-able a return to the consideration of extra-cultural matter (what in these fields is hailed as a "New Materialism"), whereas for scientists, the idea that their "reality" is also shaped by the very measurement taken to perceive this reality is an important insight. In my chapter, I want to explore onto-epistemological entanglement in conjunction with the notion of reading, because reading particularly explores and problematizes this entanglement and further connects Cultural Studies and science. This complex notion of reading will be called "diffractive reading", following Barad's own suggestions.

What makes diffractive reading interesting – also in the context of Critical Theory – is, as I argue in the following, that it entails a particularly *human* onto-epistemological entanglement. In this sense, New Materialism and Science Studies will be brought in contact with philosophical anthropology as represented by Hans Blumenberg's notion that humans make the reality around them not only understandable but also controllable by making it *legible*. Diffractive reading is therefore both an anthropological and – in the light of recent claims that we live in a geological period characterized by human interference into the shape of the earth – an *Anthropocenic* critical concept. To be sure, in her own theorization of onto-epistemological entanglement, Karen Barad is adamantly against human

supremacy in this sense and maintains that "the human" is only ever created situationally in the entanglement itself (e.g., Barad 2007: 168). By holding Barad's notion of reading against Hans Blumenberg's notion of "legibility", I want to draw a somewhat different conclusion. In the last section of my chapter, however, I want to conclude by complicating Blumenberg's account of legibility (in this case, of the genome) by going back to Baradian entanglement. Therefore, my chapter itself will become an instance of diffractive reading (reading Barad and Blumenberg against each other), albeit diffractive reading only in one sense of the term as explored by this chapter.

Diffraction and reading in Barad

Diffraction is Barad's main concept of onto-epistemological entanglement because it entails both inseparable entanglement (of two waves) and, in Barad's extension of diffraction, entanglement of the observer with what he or she observes. Barad starts off her employment of the term with a fairly (macro-)physical definition:

> [D]iffraction has to do with the way waves combine when they overlap and the apparent bending and spreading of waves that occurs when waves encounter an obstruction. Diffraction can occur with any kind of wave: for example, water waves, sound waves, and light waves all exhibit diffraction under the right conditions.
>
> (Barad 2007: 28)

These "conditions" can be obstacles of many kinds – for example, the edges of razor blades that diffract light waves or openings in natural barriers for sea water that create water diffractions. Diffraction is made observable and measurable by so-called "diffraction gratings", partitions obstructing the movement of light or water etc. except for one or several openings. The phenomenon coming up against the obstacle is diffracted into showing the behavior of a (regularly) bent wave when having passed through the opening. When there are two or more openings of similar size in the grating, two (or more) waves will interfere in a regular pattern after passing through. Diffraction in this sense creates both differences (waves of different amplitudes) and a complex interference of these differences.

Homing in on the physical phenomenon of light, Barad proceeds to compare – or rather contrast – the diffraction grating with the mirror: whereas mirrors create "more or less faithful [images]" (ibid.: 81) of the objects reflected upon them, diffraction gratings create differences, that is, light waves of different sizes interfering with each other. As Barad nicely puts it, diffraction "brings the reality of entanglement to light" (ibid.: 73), whereas mirrors leave the reflected light in a (seemingly) pure and disentangled manner. What is more, reflection can be explained without assuming the wave character of the reflected light. Reflection might just as well be particles bouncing back from a reflective surface, whereas diffraction can only be explained in waves. For the physics of light this is important because

it brings out the wave character in light, whereas under other circumstances, and also in other theories of light, light is seen as consisting of particles (photons).

In quantum physics, the scientific approach that Barad is most strongly concerned with, diffraction is present in a double manner, at least in Barad's extension of the term. First, there are important quantum-physical experiments which prove that not only light but also "electrons, neutrons, atoms and other forms of matter" (ibid.: 83) show wave behavior when sent through a special diffraction grating. In other experiments (using the same grating!), however, particle behavior can be observed in the same elements. What is more, the experimenter is in a position to decide whether he or she wants the element to behave like wave or particle: the observer decides about the nature of the observed – for Barad, a prime example of an onto-epistemological entanglement. Barad calls this particular entanglement "diffraction" because it is centered around the physical phenomenon of real diffraction. For Barad, the quantum-physical set-up therefore produces two diffractions – a real one in the observed phenomenon and a (more or less) metaphorical one on the side of the observer, in the shape of the observer's onto-epistemological entanglement with the observed phenomenon.

Barad proceeds to develop this extended notion of diffraction into an alternative for reflection, also in a wider sense. She hails diffraction as an alternative method in both Literary/Cultural Studies and Science Studies, in that diffraction heeds the entanglement of the observer with the observed phenomenon (ibid.: 86f.) and therefore takes into account that scientific (and indeed: cultural) knowledge is both historically and socially situated. As opposed to that, representationalism in Science Studies posits science as a series of discoveries of the truths about nature as revealed, in clearer and clearer mirror-like reflections, by (and to) a committed but detached observer. This notion of reflective clarity is also present, as Barad insists, in those strands in Literary and Cultural Studies that argue that their readings are clear representations of the meanings of the texts and artifacts they study. In this kind of representationalism (ibid.: 86), the representations are claimed to show the "same" as the represented, whereas a diffractive methodology knows that its representations create differences in the represented phenomena just as a diffraction grating creates a bundle of different entangled waves out of the single wave after it hits the grating.

It should already have become clear that reading is part and parcel of Barad's heuristically extended notion of diffraction. In diffractive Literary and Cultural Studies, reading is both entangled with what it is read and it brings out the differences and entanglements in and of the phenomenon that is read. To be sure, Barad herself proposes diffractive reading to be "reading through (the diffraction grating)" as opposed to reflective reading, which is "reading against (some fixed target/mirror)" (ibid.: 90). Throughout her book, she mainly characterizes the diffractive method as "reading insights [of two authors or theoretical approaches] through one another" (ibid.: 71). Reading in this sense interrelates "insights from different disciplines" (ibid.: 93) with each other, so that, for example, the terminology of one approach is (re-)defined by using definitions of the other, or that one argument is recast in the very different argumentative structure of the other.

The two approaches become entangled like two waves in a diffractive phenomenon. Importantly, neither of the two texts (or theorists) is meant to be a stable foil against which (as in a mirror) the other text, just as static, is read simply to be better understood. The two rather create a non-hierarchical network.

While this is an interesting notion of reading and one that I will use in my own chapter (by diffracting Barad with Blumenberg), what I also think is that it falls somewhat short of the full potential of diffractive reading as suggested by Barad's notion of diffraction itself. If the observer is seen to be diffracted with the observed phenomenon as in Barad's wider sense of diffraction, then diffractive reading is really the entangled (co-)creation of matter by observing or *reading* it. Arguably, this notion of reading also comes closer to what Barad sees as "reading through the diffraction grating" (adapted from ibid.: 90) than just the interlacing of two texts suggested by Barad herself. Diffractive reading in this stronger sense emerges when diffractive entanglement in physics is connected with reading in the sense of taking the results of *scientific measurement*.

Reading as taking measurements is strongly present in Barad's text and is routinely seen as interfering with or (co-)creating what is measured, even if this kind of reading is nowhere explicitly called "diffractive". Consider the following quote:

> Measurements, then, are causal intra-actions, physical processes. What we usually call a "measurement" is a correlation or entanglement between component parts of a phenomenon, between the "measured object" and the "measuring device", where the measuring device is explicitly taken to be macroscopic so that we can *read* the pattern of [e.g., diffraction] marks that the measured object leaves on it.
>
> (ibid.: 337, italics mine)

The measuring device (together with the observer) co-creates the measured phenomenon, in this (quantum) case not least because the measuring device is designed in such a way as to make the phenomenon produce particular traces that are then read by the observer. Measuring-cum-reading the phenomenon co-creates it by entanglement. This is diffractive reading in the sense of working out the entangled/wave-like nature of something (e.g., light), while at the same time partaking in the very creation of this entanglement. In her notion of (diffractive) reading, therefore, Barad addresses both what could be called a "humanities" sense of reading (hermeneutic reading/deciphering code), as with the interlacing of two texts/theorists, and a scientific sense of reading, as taking the results of measurements.[1] She relates both these kinds of reading to her notion of onto-epistemological entanglement: diffractive reading is either the non-hierarchizing entangling of two texts/theorists or the co-creating of matter by making it readable. To expand reading to include the latter sense (even if only suggestively) is a considerable achievement. There are already theories of intrusive reading in Literary/Cultural Studies, but they are almost exclusively concentrated on interference in cultural/social meaning systems, as in deconstructive approaches,[2] and do not take into account the idea of reading as interfering with an extra-cultural, scientific

reality. The scientific notion of reading has been part and parcel of the term for a long time, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) shows us, but is routinely overlooked in Literary/Cultural Studies despite the centrality of the concept of reading in these fields. Barad not only introduces the scientific notion of reading into Literary/Cultural Studies, she also radicalizes it (also for science!) in the context of her new materialist philosophy of onto-epistemological entanglement.

Reading code and measurements in Blumenberg

Reading in this very general sense has been explored (only) once[3] before, in the work of famous German philosophical anthropologist Hans Blumenberg. His *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (1981, "The Legibility of the World") is a central work in the Blumenberg canon; an English translation was planned by University of Chicago Press in the early 1990s but never materialized. In the final chapter, Blumenberg importantly compares scientific and hermeneutic reading in the light of the scientific field of genetics. If you confront Barad's double notion of reading with Blumenberg's chapter, the outcome both complicates and enriches Barad's ideas.

For Blumenberg, the legibility of the world is a double metaphorical complex that makes reality available for human beings as readable against the horizon of a meaningful totality, the world. Therefore, he analyzes the medieval and early modern notions of the *Book of the World* or the *Book of Nature*, among others. For Blumenberg, reading is world understanding, that is, metaphorical world creation against the backdrop of a meaningful totality, a real book like the Bible or a a metaphorical book like the Book of the World. In the last chapter of *Die Lesbarkeit*, Blumenberg considers modern science and scientific reading in the sense also explored by Barad. For Blumenberg, with the advent of modern science, a new notion of reading (nature) emerged that conceived of reading not as the reception of a coherent text, a unified whole, anymore, but rather as the deciphering of discreet units, whose totality is not (yet) known to the reader and can therefore not provide the horizon for the reading process (Blumenberg 1981: 373). The phenomenon studied in this last chapter is the genome, or so-called genetic code, a complex instance of scientific world reading and world construction indeed. Like Rheinberger (1997)[4] after him, Blumenberg sees the genome as a phenomenon co-created by nature and the human observers eager to understand nature. In a similar way to the wave/particle traces in Barad, the genome is (diffractively) read both in and into nature, it is both studied and created by studying it. What is even more important (and *diffractive*), however, is that reading the genome entails (re-) writing it on a large scale, as Blumenberg notes (ibid.: 398). The process of genetic synthesis and gene editing that Blumenberg hints at was only in its early stages when he wrote his book in the early 1980s but has since become a common (diffractive) scientific technique when decoded (i.e., read) genetic sequences are synthetically created (i.e., written) and then inserted back into cells in order to change the genome of an organism permanently.[5]

Genetic editing is clearly a particularly dense notion of diffractive reading not only because it comprises highly momentous and interfering reading/writing

activities in(to) nature but also because it combines the scientific notion of read-ing a measurement with the (humanities) notion of reading code. At the same time, however, when related to genetic editing, diffractive reading now appears in a much more complex and problematic light: it is intrusive, "artificial" and exclusively *human*.[6] This challenges Karen Barad's notion of diffractive reading as onto-epistemological entanglement because it now appears to be based on an – at least: epistemic[7] – distance to, not entanglement with, nature. For Blumenberg, reading the world scientifically implies controlling it from what is both a human perspective and a human detachment. Science is an activity, he writes, "based on a tremendous [human] distance to any immediacy of nature" (ibid.: 373, translation mine), which means reversely that "[a]s natural beings, we would stand no chance to know about nature what theory allows us to know about nature" (ibid.: 374). It is from this *distance* that any possibility to arrange for a particular scientific set-up that provides for an onto-epistemological diffractive reading, to use Baradian terminology, only emerges. For Blumenberg, nonhuman beings cannot build any such apparatuses, neither do they need them.

This sense of detached scientific world control/creation sounds irreconcilable with Barad's notion of onto-epistemological entanglement. For her, to be sure, not only is there no prior human detachment, but human agency – and even the very category of the human – is being created within the scientific apparatus:

> Phenomena are not mere human contrivances manufactured in labora-tories. . . . There are no preexisting, separately determinate entities called "humans" that are either *detached spectators* or necessary components of all intra-actions. Rather, to the extent that "humans" emerge as having a role to play in the constitution of specific phenomena, they do so as part of the larger material configuration, or rather the ongoing reconfiguring, of the world. Thus no *a priori* privileged status is given to the human – and this is precisely the point. "Humans" are emergent phenomena like all other physical systems.
>
> (Barad 2007: 338, first italics mine)

Diffracted with Blumenberg's thorough anthropological characterization of (sci-entific) reading as a cultural technique based on human detachment, however, Barad's entanglement of both reading and the reader into the diffractive process of world creation appears to be problematic and is qualified even in her own argu-ment. We sense the very "detached spectator" denied here in Barad's celebration of quantum indeterminacies, referred to already previously, when Barad praises the decision-making power of the scientist who sets up the experiment. In the most radical of these experiments, the experimenter even comes to decide the nature of the studied phenomenon in retrospect:

> But if the experimenter can decide whether or not an interference pattern will result by deciding whether or not to erase the which[-]path information long after each atom has already hit the screen then it seems the experimenter has control over the past.
>
> (ibid.: 312)

If the experimenter "decide[s]" and "control[s]" the outcome of the experiment and even the temporal axis of this outcome, then he or she is in no way entangled in the experiment, let alone only ever emerges as an agent in the process. To be sure, in the same argument, Barad immediately insists that the "agencies of observation" (ibid.: 315) and the "objects" are entangled but significantly leaves out the human experimenter. In the spelling out of these agencies ("the micromaser cavities, the photodetector-shutter system, the double slit diffraction grating, and the screen among other elements") there is a significant silence concerning the human agent.

Altogether, then, the detached human diffractive reader-creator is a specter in Barad's text, appearing in moments of great argumentative intensity. Confronted more thoroughly, by adducing Blumenberg's conception of scientific reading, it becomes clear that it cannot be chased away: human distance is the basis of all science, indeed of human epistemology in general, so that an onto-epistemological entanglement including the human cannot be posited so easily. Blumenberg complicates and intensifies Barad's notion of diffractive reading and shows it to be a *human* endeavor to construct and control nature. Diffractive reading *diffracts*, that is, manipulates, nature but is not the hyper-interrelated phenomenon, co-creative even of the human reader, that Barad envisages. Rather, it turns out to be an anthropocentric cultural technique and part of a scientific culture that has contributed to what we have come to call the Anthropocene, a period in which the human interference with the earth is now the current main characteristic of the planet. Diffractive reading, therefore, becomes graspable both as an anthropocentric and as an Anthropocenic[8] concept if it is itself diffracted with Blumenberg's notion of scientifically reading (the genome).

Diffracting back: reading the entanglement(s) in genetics

However, it is exactly the notion of the Anthropocene that shows us that we do not at all have to give up on Barad's notion of entanglement. On the opposite: the Anthropocene gives ample proof that human interference with nature, even if it is based on human separation from it, can of course lead (back) to an (ontological) entanglement with it that does away with the very control meant to be exerted on nature by science. And this precarious entanglement is indeed exemplified by genetics itself, so that we can now return to Blumenberg's account of genetic reading and read a Baradian diffraction back into it.

Toward the end of his argument on reading the genome, Blumenberg comes to suggest that the genome predetermines and controls the protein synthesis, the so-called "epigenesis" (Blumenberg 1981: 407), less than has been thought and that, instead, the cell is much more active and decisive in this process. The creation of organisms out of genomes, therefore, is less a procedure dictated by the DNA than it is a correlation of genome and cell, in which the genome makes the blueprints available but the actual starting moment of amino acid synthesis and also the decision of which sections of the DNA are implemented at all is connected to cell processes outside the genome. As Keller (1998: 46) puts it, the DNA is not the

brain of the cell; the process of epigenesis is rather scattered throughout the cell as a whole. Thomas Lemke (2002: 10) aptly calls this notion of the genetic process a "flat ontology" as opposed to the (formerly thought) deep ontology in which the genome was seen as deciding the shape of the organism on a deeper, more essential level and as being prior to it also on a temporal level. Recent genetics, therefore, have come to see the genome-protein complex as an entanglement of mutual influence rather than a unidirectional sequence.

This interrelated notion of genetics is, significantly enough, connected to the history of human interference into the genetic process. It was exactly with the deciphering of the human genome in the so-called Human Genome Project, completed in 2003, that it also became clear that the functions of large sections of the DNA remain in the dark and that, as has been described, the DNA-based protein synthesis in the cell was far too complex and too individual ever to be controlled to any considerable degree by the human reader of the DNA. This is a diffractive reading process indeed, but one that can only be understood by looking at it from the perspectives of both Barad and Blumenberg: even if the genetic process is the interrelated development, the diffractive reading, theorized by Barad, and cannot be controlled by human scientists from the outside, it is based on (exclusively) *human* interference in organism development, as confirmed by Blumenberg. Entanglement of matter and meaning there is, but it is not creative *of* the human but created *by* humans and therefore all the more consequential.

To be fair, Barad addresses the question of human responsibility at the end of her book, which means she finally arrives at analytically centralizing the human being from an ethical perspective. And yet, her account is wholly convincing only at the beginning, I think, and becomes problematic again when she leaves the (self-)centering of the human being behind:

> Responsibility is not ours alone. And yet our responsibility is greater than it would be if it were ours alone. . . . Our (intra)actions matter – each one reconfigures the world in its becoming – and yet they never leave us. [E]ven in our becoming there is no "I" separate from the intra-active becoming of the world.
>
> (Barad 2007: 394)

To posit an "'I' separate from the intra-active becoming of the world" is, to my mind, a critical necessity. If one follows Blumenberg, even if there is definitely an entanglement or diffraction of humans with the world, it is based on a history of human separation from the world, which led both to the dream of an epistemological control of nature and, gradually but increasingly, to the precarious and incapacitating return to, and interference with, nature in the Anthropocene.[9] Diffractive reading is therefore an important term in the Anthropocene, and one that brings both Literary/Cultural Studies and philosophical anthropology into contact with the scientific worldview – if it is itself diffracted to include, centralize and problematize, the question of *human* agency. Diffractive reading of this kind heeds the project of critiquing (both historically and systematically) human

episteme, which means that the history of Critical Theory[10] is not simply bypassed in favor of an undifferentiated materialism. Instead, diffractive reading proposes a new method of critique that is both interventive and self-critical just because it posits the ontological entanglement of human thought and therefore pushes "reading" from the sphere of code to the sphere of (extra-cultural) matter, which ultimately also means into new spheres of ethical responsibility and political impact.[11]

Notes

1 Arguably, reading as measuring is closer to the original meaning of the word. In the *OED*, to be sure, "reading" appears as related to the German "raten" and means among other things "consider, interpret, discern". "Reading", therefore, has no automatic connotation to letters or code. The scientific meaning considered by Barad is *OED* II 11c: "To take a measurement" (German "ablesen").

2 Derridaen deconstruction is called "reading as intervention" in Deutscher 2005: 15–26.

3 There is a range of joint explorations of the hermeneutic and the scientific notion of reading in relation to the special case of genome reading, e.g. Keller 1998; Kay 2000; Roof 2007; Wülfingen 2016. Only Blumenberg and Barad, however, compare hermeneutic and scientific reading in its wider theoretical implications, touching upon both Literary/Cultural and Science Studies. Spiller 2004 explores reading as both book reception and scientific world observation in the early modern period.

4 Rheinberger 1997 explores the advent of the genome as a so-called "epistemtic thing", which in his argument is the co-creation of a scientific object, such as the genome, by the (often completely coincidental) discovery of certain natural phenomena on the one hand and the "graphematic articulations" (106) used to turn these discoveries into a phenomenon representable to human perception on the other hand: the genome is read and written diffractively. Cf. Barad 2006, 219, on human interference in genetic activity but without the notion of reading the genome.

5 See for the latest development in methods like Crispr Gene Editing and Gene Drive e.g. Irmer 2019; Müller 2019. Müller's complaint that the Humanities do not deal with the new challenges of genetics sufficiently is contradicted by, e.g. Hamner 2017 and ultimately by my own article. What is more, as we will see, genetic activity is more complex and human gene editing less simple than made out by Müller.

6 Even if natural mutation could be seen as a diffractive reading process of the genome, undertaken, as it were, by the cell itself, gene editing is not really comparable to natural mutation because, in the case of certain Gene Drive procedures for example, the artificial mutation of a species is meant to exterminate it and hence stop (its) natural mutation altogether (Irmer 2019).

7 It could be argued that this distance is only epistemic and not ontological. i.e. that we (can't help but) *think* ourselves detached from nature, whereas (with) our bodies (we) are clearly entangled in it. Much as this would reconcile, e.g., Speculative Realism with diffractive New Materialism, Blumenberg, however, would not agree: humans are also ontologically detached from nature, ever since they found themselves the only species unadapted to its natural surroundings and hence in need to develop cultural techniques, such as housing, clothing, language etc. (cf. Blumenberg 2006 and his assertion that "both the organic and cultural evolution of human beings led them out of nature" in Blumenberg 1981: 373 [my translation]).

8 Surprisingly, or perhaps characteristically, "Anthropocene" is a word unused in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, even if the concept was popularized from around the year 2000.

9   The starting point of the Anthropocene is under discussion. While some argue for its concurrence with human history as a whole, many scholars date its beginning to the 1950s (Müller-Jung 2019).

10 To be sure, Blumenberg has always distanced himself from the Frankfurt School. I would not hesitate, however, to class his relentless reconstruction of the history and consequences of human intellect with the project of Critical Theory in spirit.

11 Within the scope of this essay, it is not possible to show the potential of diffractive reading for analyzing literary/cultural texts in their relationship to extracultural matter. A collection of readings of this kind is forthcoming (Merten 2021). These essays go to prove that integrating extra-cultural matter into processes (and theories) of reading shows how reading both shapes the world and allows for the notion of a particularly open and (self-)critical textuality. As the volume works out, bringing reading together with diffraction makes reading more 'interventive', in relation to matter, in relation to other interventions into matter and, finally, in relation to other texts about such interventions. Diffractive reading is pushed to a level where it shows its intrinsic tendency to both incisive critique and incisive self-critique.

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13 Adventures in anti-fascist aesthetics*

Claire Blencowe

Introduction

This chapter was conceived amidst the despair that followed the 2015 UK general election, which confirmed (yet again) the vanquishing of pro-poor egalitarian politics in the UK. More dismal still was the rise of anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric to which the election bore witness, with the far-right UK Independence Party (UKIP) gaining 14% of the English vote – the foreshadow of Brexit. Whilst various forces fostered this rise of the populist right, there is much agreement that an anxious, disaffected, post-industrial-working class seeking some kind of anti-establishment political representation was part of the UKIP success story – similar arguments have since been made about the success of Donald Trump in the US. At that moment the Green Party seemed to have become the only audible voice of pro-poor politics and decent living standards in England. A tale was told of the "Green Surge" as an alternative to UKIP (Harris 2014): that the disaffected masses who despair of mainstream politics might invest their affections in the affirmative politics of ecological life-quality and diversity rather than the scapegoating rank-closing racism of the Right.

However unrealistic it might have been, the Green Surge story resonates with the claims of Naomi Klein and others that impending environmental catastrophe and emergent ecological ways of seeing might come to the rescue of anti-capitalist and pro-poor popular politics (Klein 2015), a politics that is otherwise drowning in hegemonic market-fundamentalism. William Connolly has claimed that environmental and ecological imaginaries can breathe new vitality into a left that has not recovered from the loss of its affectively invested industrial base (Connolly 2014). Of course, the argument is not only that environmentalism can rescue anti-capitalism but also that anti-capitalism is rendered vital by actual and impending environmental catastrophe. An urgent about-turn from the perpetual pursuit of growth that capital demands figures as a final hope for survival. It is this urgency and insistence that the Greens, Klein, Connolly and many others hope will revitalize peoples' movements. By 2019 these hopes had been formalized into calls for a "Green New Deal" as the populist-left alternative to mounting fascism and despair.

Stengers recalls Rosa Luxemburg's claim (Luxemburg 1967 [1915]) that the world faces an ultimatum between socialism and barbarism – wherein

"barbarism" refers to "the perpetual state of war that capitalism makes rule" (Stengers 2015). Stengers suggests that the catastrophic consequences of global warming prefigure and constitute an intensification of capitalist barbarism. However, climatic catastrophe also renews the possibility of resisting the (always already barbaric) capitalist rule. Against the "infernal alternatives" of capitalist sorcery – that render thinking impossible – she argues, climatic catastrophe imposes an objection: in the face of truly catastrophic climate events we have no choice *but* to think, which is (always already) to resist capitalism. The demand created by our material conditions appears in this analysis as a kind of spiritualizing adrenalin shot that might kick-start an otherwise moribund anti-capitalist politics.

In her discussion of capitalist barbarism Stengers does not mention race and racism – although she does point to the denigration of indigenous knowledges and explicitly situates her work among efforts to "decolonise thought" (Stengers 2012). However, racism is central to the dynamics of capitalist sorcery and barbarism that she alludes to. The pursuit of profit and development without limit produce inequalities, dispossession and violence – which operate through technologies of racism, denigration and militant-policing. These have been variously collectively named slavery, colonialism, barbarism, state-racism, fascism and policing the crisis. Since the dawn of imperial capitalism peoples' movements have posited solidarity, equality and common ownership as the means to escape capitalist violence. Since the dawn of imperial capitalism, racism has been deliberately cultivated by plantation owners, colonial governors, politicians and police to break solidarities, divide and rule, and scapegoat. The triumphalist claim of the neoliberal era, that "there is no alternative", is the silencing of peoples' movements and has been attended by intense waves of racism. Everyday racism produces the perpetuation of capitalist order.

In relation to the reorganizations of labor that prefigure submissions to the "no alternative" of economic growth Stengers writes:

> What presents itself as a logical consequence . . . has been fabricated by multiple processes of so called rational reorganisation that in the first place aimed at sapping or capturing the capacities for thinking and resisting of those who were apt to do so.
>
> (Stengers 2015)

Such fabrication is not only effected through rules and knowledge. The material articulation of differentiated capacities and threats to differently racialized bodies invests such logics in the somatechtonics that matter fear, attachment and joy. We might imagine a million "micro-fascisms" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004), reverberating through the petty investments of everyday embodiment but ready to resonate together, to build to certain crescendos, and make certain silence. We might also listen out for the sorrow songs that fill such silence, to meet, with Sylvia Wynter (1995), those "genres of the human" that already flourish beyond the world of Man (Weheliye 2014). Attending to racism and fascism in the matter

of capitalist order places aesthetics, the organization of experience, at the center of concern.

This chapter embarks on an adventure in search of anti-fascist aesthetics. My own perspective is rooted in critical theory and political history. Chasing theological threads, I wonder whether ecological attunement might really be a serious opponent of capitalist sorcery, especially as figured in the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim poison of our present ground. My adventures commence, as all must, from the place that I happen to begin, in step with the spirits that brought me. So I turn to feminist philosophy of science and new materialisms. What, I ask these guides, can ecological attunement offer to the task of composing anti-fascist, anti-capitalist political subjectivity or shattering the reality principle of the "no alternative"? Among the responses to that question are certain ideas that we might call "theological figurations" – figures that open onto the theological task of questioning the value of values and the political task of mustering spirit. Centering on an attempt to think ecofeminism with Stengers I turn to three figures: the enchantress, the witch and the intrusion of Gaia.

Figure 1: The enchantress

Longstanding traditions of eco-feminist thinking have associated the disenchantment or profanation of nature (and the feminine) with a kind of technocratic barbarism that equates progress and development with control (Shiva 1993). As Vandana Shiva explains, this technological idea of progress promotes "monocultures of the mind" that centralize power, accumulate wealth for elites, and impoverish eco-systems and social-systems in a common move against diversity.

Eco-feminist thought associates a proliferation of technocratic rationality and hierarchical, centralizing, domination and exploitation with a destruction of theology – or rather, with the destruction of theological diversity and the promotion of an extremist monotheism that defers to God the Father, or His secularized incantations: technology or the Market (Szerszynski 2008). These monotheistic (anti) theologies model the sacred upon the exploitative will of the colonial, patriarchal subject.

Eco-feminism looks to something like a resacralization of nature and the feminine as a means to resist both environmental and social degradation – holding nature not only as an object of respect and intrinsic value but also as a source of wisdom on which we can model human relationships. Bio-diversity is the genius of nature. The marvelousness of nature – wonder at the infinite variety of forms and force of creativity that is arrived at through scientific and practical engagement with the forces of earth and life – constitutes a kind of immanent spirituality, where the divine is love, attraction and the miraculous powers of creating and sustaining life – a divinity that is utterly earthly.

Insofar as Marxism and Western feminism have placed faith in the progressive force of technological domination, or equated freedom with the transcendence of material necessity, they have, according to eco-feminists, participated in the

profanation of nature and the destruction of real creativity, enrichment and suste-nance of life.

Jane Bennett (2001, 2009) resonates with eco-feminism when she calls forth "the enchantment of modern life". Whilst she does not write of "nature" as enchanting or wise, she does write against the technologistic pessimism of criti-cal theory and the notion that the modern world has become, or has to be, dis-enchanted. The submission of critical thought to an image of the modern world as de-spirited and rationalizing constitutes, she suggests, a kind of giving up on politics – "an attitude of emotional detachment that grounds itself in a false sense of both historical fatalism and ontological determinism, and fosters sentiments of alienation, hopelessness and ingenerosity in its exponents" (Saraka 2000). Sober pessimism, however lucid, remains insufficient "to the enactment of ethical aspi-rations". Instead of this, and in line with the attitude of eco-feminism, Bennett seeks to advance the affective force of moments of wonder as a source of energy that might propel ethical generosity.

For Bennett, wonder, mystery and affective movement are to be found not only in the splendor of bio-diversity but in the vibrancy of matter and material systems in general. She wonders at the dizzying complexity and sur-reality of bureau-cracy (as captured by Kafka) as well as at dancing bodies, mediated spectacle and "inanimate" material things as much as at forests and critters. To see the liveliness of things is to cultivate capacities for affirmation: capacities that might dissipate dispirited atmospheres and engender new political energies.

Bennett presents enchantment or wonder as the experience of being "struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the everyday . . . a . . . feeling of being torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition" (2001: 2, 5). "The overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude or liveliness, a sense of having had one's nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up and recharged – a shot in the arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life" (ibid.: 5).

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Does this figuration – this call to enchantment – speak to the despair with which this chapter began? Does it make more plausible the "Green alternative to UKIP" story?

What emerges from eco-feminism and vitalist-materialism is an aesthetic – or spirituality – centered upon affirmation, diversity and interconnection. This aesthetic affirms the immanent creative capacities of earthly entanglement; the life sustaining force of diversity, encounter and difference; the mystery, wonder and extraordinariness of everyday life, the material, the here and now. It offers a vibrant affirmative aesthetic that is attentive to the emotional life of political action and to the capacity of connection, space and encounter to foster positive affect. It fosters a beautiful vision.

Shiva's ecofeminism is grounded in the concrete limit-experiences and eve-ryday finitude of agrarian peasant life and collaborative science. It conveys a

fulsome and charged political sense of spirituality. However, it is less clear that enchantment with matter posited in more abstract terms, as in Bennett's vital materialism, musters quite the same grip. There is something ethereal in Bennett's materialism; we are seemingly suspended in a strangely innocent positivity, admitting only optimistic energy. Without a grounding in struggle and experimentation with the limits of life, an affirmative spirituality of vital difference has less affect – or at least does not seem adept to affect the painful problematics of racism, *ressentiment* and wounded attachment that bind bodies to UKIP and their ilk.

Moreover the idea of enchantment *per se* as redemption seems to assume that the spiritual problem at present is that we are lacking chants. But this ignores the siren songs of our enemies. It is hard to trust that enchantment will – in and of itself – be enough to launch an escape from the present because *we are already enchanted* – we are already subjects of the capitalist religion: spell-bound by technology, economy and there-is-no-alternative (TINA) syndrome (Shiva 1993); passionate, insufferable, adherents of puritan programs of austerity and economic redemption (Konings 2015).

So ecological attunement as enchantment might furnish us with beautiful diversity, affirming visions and wisdoms that inspire us. But such enchantment might not be enough to lift despair in the face of fascism. We need, perhaps, a more carnivorous, cannibalistic, diet (Césaire 2012).[1]

Figure 2: The witch

Confronting some of the obvious secularist and anti-essentialist critiques of ecofeminism Stengers has argued that what is significant in the feminist spirituality of nature is not belief (essentialist or otherwise) but practice – practical crafts and technologies for transforming attention. The example that she frequently comes back to when discussing such activism is Starhawk.

Starhawk is a witch of the neopagan Reclaim craft. She is an eco-feminist, peace activist, permaculturalist and author. She has been a leading figure of the Goddess movement – a mostly North American revival, or "reclaimation", of pagan and wiccan traditions through which, she says, "Mother Goddess is reawakening and we can begin to recover our primal birth right, the sheer, intoxicating joy of being alive" (Starhawk 1999). Starhawk sees the rise of the Goddess as fundamentally political and socially transformative. "The symbol of the Goddess conveys the spiritual power both to challenge systems of oppression and to create new, life oriented cultures" (1999: 35). She associates the Christian suppression of Goddess Religion with the establishment of both patriarchy and capitalist exploitation.

In her activism and training courses Starhawk makes use of mythological symbols, rituals and the techniques of magic – which she defines as "the art of changing consciousness at will" (1999: 38, citing Dion Fortune) and "of sensing and shaping the subtle, unseen forces that flow through the world, of awakening deeper levels of consciousness beyond the rational. . . [awakening] long-forgotten powers of the human mind" (ibid.: 37). The techniques of magic "are used to create states of ecstasy. . . [and] union with the divine" as well as "material results,

such as healing, since in the Craft there is no split between spirit and matter" (ibid.: 38). Much of her writing for groups concerns the creation and control of energies, emphasizing the creativity of play and miracles of faith. Much of her writing for individual well-being and learning concerns how to become grounded in the rhythms of nature, which she has translated into a spiritual version of permaculture training. She was among the organizers of the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization and wrote an influential essay, celebrating the moment as an ontological event marked by joy, contributing to the foundation of the alter-globalization movement (Stengers, Massumi and Manning 2008).

In addition to the power of magic and joy, a key theme that is born by the figure of the witch for present anti-capitalist activism is that of identification with the victims of capitalist enclosures. Feminist historian Silvia Federici (2005) has made the case for the importance of the early modern witch-hunts as a key event in capitalist history. In the "burning times" hundreds of thousands of people (the majority women) were burned as witches, condemned as such by judges in specially appointed courts of law.[2] The way that this event has failed to enter political consciousness – has been made to disappear into a hazy mythical past – is, for Federici, a symptom not only of our blindness to women's history but also of the ongoing foundation of capitalism upon the appropriation of human bodies and reproductive capacities.

The burning times coincided with the rolling out of enclosures, the establishment of mercantile capitalism, the transatlantic slave trade and the colonization of the Americas. Federici argues that the witch hunt was one of the most important events in the development of capitalist society and the formation of the modern proletariat. The

> unleashing of a campaign of terror against women, unmatched by any other persecution, weakened the resistance of the European peasantry to the assault launched against it by the gentry and the state, at a time when the peasant community was already disintegrating under the combined impact of land privatisation, increased taxation, and the extension of state control over every aspect of social life.
>
> (Federici 2005)

Images of devil worship, witch-craft, cannibalism, rampant sexuality and savagery were inscribed in law. They reverberated back and forth between the policing of the European peasantry and of indigenous people and Africans in the American colonies, where the idea of indigenous people as devil-worshiping cannibals – fit for annihilation – hailed genocidal force.

On the one hand, Federici situates the witch hunts within the long history of capitalist "divide and rule" and "scapegoat" tactics – introducing fear and suspicion into communities, and breaking solidarity especially between men and women. She stresses that rebellious peasant community leaders were very often women, and that their authority was undermined at this time. On the other hand,

Federici situates the persecution of witches and magic within the rationalizing requirements of capitalist ontologies – establishing rational control over bodies, especially women's bodies and their reproductive capacities. The body as a receptacle of magical powers, which had prevailed in the medieval world, had to be destroyed so that labor-power could live. These tactics have reappeared throughout capitalist history, with real and metaphorical witch hunts accompanying each new act of enclosure, primitive accumulation and intensification of work-culture.

In identifying as witches, Starhawk and others profess solidarity with the victims of this long violent history of enclosure – wherein fear and division are deliberately cultivated to undermine community; rituals and traditions are destroyed to break powerful connections to land; and non-capitalizable ways of peasant living are rendered shameful or illegal. Stengers asks us to acknowledge that we ourselves participate in such shaming: That

> we have learned the codes of our respective milieus: derisive remarks, knowing smiles, offhand judgments, often about somebody else, but gifted with the power to pervade and infect – to shape us as those who sneer and not among those who are sneered at.
>
> (Stengers 2012)

<center>***</center>

To return to our matter of despair. Will these witches save us?

The witches weave a marvelous yarn. The image of burned grandmothers, alongside enslaved ancestors, is powerful politicizing "fuel for the spleen" (Benjamin 1968). The language of commons and enclosure has found significant resonance in recent years, in activist circles at least, animating attempts to fight back against the global onslaught of neoliberal privatization (Kirwan, Dawney and Brigstocke 2015). The figure of the witch, and the memory of the "burning times", can highlight the connection between the age old capitalist acts of appropriation and the sorcery that is the deliberate cultivation of racism, division and religious persecution. It also provides a technical field for subjectification – that connects people across social divisions through the affirmation of everyday arts of self-health care, healing and practical wisdom.

The aesthetic of association and joy explodes through the images and practices of witchcraft. Crucial here is a celebration of humor and recognition that serious insight and politics very often arrives through play and "make believe". Techniques of magic, as play, often involve letting go not only of the self but its very sense of reality.

So there is something powerfully disruptive, mobilizing, connecting and division-overcoming in the political imaginary and craft of these witches. Starhawk is a tremendously powerful eco-feminist activist. Nonetheless, I suspect that there are limits to her appeal and resonance among mass working-class polities. As she herself is the first to caution, she and most people in the Goddess Movement are white and middle class. The race and class situation of the

movement creates barriers to participation. The residential courses that she runs in permaculture, group leadership and spirituality carry prohibitive price tags. But more importantly, the whole aesthetic of the movement – the make-do-and-mend Earth Mother attire – cannot, whatever the intention and despite all the exceptions, escape the excluding play of status distinction in a world in which working class and black culture are associated with brand-name clothing, conspicuous consumption and smarts.[3] Perhaps most important of all is the absence of the industrial working class from the narrative that is told by these witches. When the narrative of contemporary environmentalist activists, academics and feminist science is linked to the experience and struggle of peasant and indigenous movements, the experience of industrial and post-industrial working classes and a five-hundred-year history of exploitation and resistance seemingly falls out of view.

We might do well to situate the neo-pagan movement as but one part of a wider and more diverse striving for alternative, magical, humanism; one articulated rather differently by Wynter (1995) – who like Frantz Fanon looks for magic in the humanity that has been othered by Man –, or in Donna Haraway's (2016) cyborg, or Jasbir Puar's (2012) "cyborgian-godesses".

Figure 3: The intrusion of Gaia

In *Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (2015), Stengers invites us to name the catastrophes of climate change "the intrusion of Gaia". With this she suggests that the inescapability of climate events introduces a new transcendence into experience. Climatic catastrophes intrude upon and transfigure our human world, Goddess like, coming from outside and beyond the realms of human knowledge and control. This new/ancient transcendent, she suggests, might disrupt the otherwise overwhelming force of that other great transcendent force of our times: economic growth or Mammon, which so despotically determines values and lives.[4] In classical mythology, Gaia – or Terra – is the primal earth-mother, who precedes and gives birth to all the Gods of the pantheon. In the 1970s James Lovelock took her as namesake for the phenomenal interconnectedness of the earth's systems. Stengers wants to carry forward this sense of Gaia as something that "holds together", whilst firmly rejecting Lovelock's assumption that Gaia holds *like* an organism or on the model of health. For Stengers, Gaia is not a normalizing organism but a chaotic and unknowable force that responds and transforms in unpredictable and unstable ways. Gaia responds to interference, she is "ticklish . . . and that is why she must be named as a being" (2015: 32), but she does not do so to re-establish a previous state of normalcy or health. Gaia does not need "saving" or "conserving". It is we humans and fellow critters that need saving from *her*.

Gaia is well named, Stengers claims, because Gaia was once honored "as the fearsome one". She was addressed by peasants "who knew that humans depend on something much greater than them, something that tolerates them, but with a tolerance that must not be abused" (ibid.: 32). If she was a mother, she was "an irritable one, who should not be offended" – coming from a time before the "cult

of maternal love" (ibid.). Today, imprudently, "a margin of tolerance has been well and truly exceeded. . . . And the response that Gaia risks giving might well be without any measure in relation to what we have done, a bit like a shrugging of the shoulder provoked when one is briefly touched by a midge" (ibid.: 33).

The intrusion of Gaia is spiritualizing, or theologizing, in the sense of bringing transcendence into experienced reality (or positing an alternative transcendence to the already ubiquitous transcendent: economic growth). The transcendent exceeds our self-projection and poses questions to which we cannot but respond. Capitalist sorcery binds us into destructive torrents of action through TINA syndrome (Shiva 1993) and the specter of "infernal alternatives" (Pignarre and Stengers 2011) where the constant retort to any protest is "yes it's unfortunate but if we stop doing this we will cause this other calamity". The fabrication and montage of such alternatives constitutes a sorcerer's attack "that captures the capacity to act, imagine, exist and struggle" (Pignarre and Stengers 2011). The intrusion of Gaia can break this sorcerer's spell. The catastrophic scale of impending and actual events is such that it becomes newly possible to refuse – to say, "I'm sorry but we simply *must* do something differently now" (Stengers 2015). As Klein (2015) asserts it "changes everything".

It is this refusal that, for Stengers, creates the possibility of resisting the coming barbarism. Stengers celebrates the arts of composition, assembling around a problem, engaging experimentation and creating artifacts. It is in such experimentation that anything akin to genuine "enlightenment" might reside. The intrusion of Gaia opens up possibilities to recoup energies and arts of experimentation from the teeth of economic growth and its despotism. And a part of such opening up is a reclamation (reactivation) of modes of living, knowledges and practices that have been denigrated and annihilated in the name of economic growth, reason or progress. The idea that we could make do without artifact (that we could survive as pure human-centered secular reason) has been naught but a foolhardy belief that we no longer have to pay attention. The intrusion of Gaia – climatic catastrophe – dispels that myth.

There is something potentially spiritualizing in the intrusion of Gaia and the responses it might provoke. Indeed we could argue that there is a sense in which confrontation with catastrophe is intrinsically spiritualizing. Chaos, death and intolerable conditions call forth creative and collective agency – dancing through ruins, singing-through anger, demanding what is impossible, moving to avenge. Meaning is rendered immanent in matters of survival. There is a common sense in the assertions of Liberation Theology, Marxist philosophy and anti-colonial theory that the spirit moves among the dammed.

The sheer affront, not only to life itself, but also to the apparent justice that can make life tolerable, catapults us into the kind of disassociation and fragmentation from which spiritual consciousness and activism can emerge. Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) writes of light in the dark. In the suffering and disruption of disorientating illness, an earth-quake, and a terrorist attack she recounts the emergence of perception, consciousness and spiritual-activism. Chaotic disruptions, violence and death catapult us into states of disassociation and fragmentation that make

it possible to "revise reality", enter processes of healing and see in terms of new wholes (2015: 17–21). "Spirituality", she writes, "is an ontological belief in the existence of things outside the body (exosomatic), as opposed to the belief that material reality is a projection of mentally created images" (ibid.: 37). No wonder, then, that radical disruptions and intrusions open-up spirituality. "Spirit", she adds, "represents the zest for living – the energizing power for life . . . the inner voice, the electrical charge, that says, 'I'm going to do it. I *will* do it'" (Anzaldúa 2015: 38). No wonder, then, that pressure on life – suffocation, suffering and violence – provokes spirit. The collectivization of the "going to", the "will" in the face of its impossibility is what Fanon (1963) calls "revolt" and Michel Foucault (1981) calls "political spirituality". The amalgamation of spiritual practice (which cultivates perception) with political technologies (which collectivize) is what Anzaldúa calls "spiritual-activism". In narrating the intrusion of Gaia, Stengers can be seen as engaged in the cultivation of such "spiritual-activism", "political-spirituality" or "revolt": a spiritualization that works not through enchantment and attunement so much as through provocation – a provocation above all to think.

If (and it is an *if*) there is something akin to God in Stengers' vision it would not be any kind of divine entity, but rather something like divinity as activity – the coming together, the becoming unsettled, the being forced to think, the entry into experimentation. Following Whitehead, we might say that God is existent in the creative expectation of positivity, "the thirst for some novelty" (Stengers 2011), that constitutes the sociality that is being. God, or a movement toward God, might be present in the refusal to accept that "there is no alternative" and in the capacities to assemble to respond.

Stengers foregrounds the capacities of catastrophe to engender new forms of consciousness, perception and agency. There is "light in the dark" (Anzaldúa 2015). However, this is an ambiguous movement – it is clear that this agency is not straight forwardly "good". Chaos spiritualizes, but all manner of spirits roam. There is dark in the light. To resist barbarism, the "no-alternative", the "with-us-or-against-us", is to step away from insufferable self-righteous certainties into the space of ambiguity – breathing space – to embrace faculties for composition, experimentation. It is not to be good, but to take up the knowledge that "good does not exist without evil", nor "pleasure without pain, love without hate" (ibid.: 32) or cure without poison (Stengers 2015). In Stengers' terminology, it is to take up "the art of the Pharmakon", administering drugs, that can cure and can poison and that we can never really know in advance.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

To return for a final time to our problem of despair . . .

The intrusion of Gaia seems to evoke, then, a kind of pragmatist political spirituality: the art of the Pharmakon, the creative and indeterminate assemblage of people around problems and courageous attitudes of genuine experimentation. It points toward a powerful reimagining of the task of scientists and activists in the cultivation of an ethos that could escape the capitalist sorcery of infernal

alternatives. Indeed, it is to scientists and activists that Stengers is most explicitly addressed in this text.

From the perspective of our *own* (not Stengers') problem, however, such a pragmatist political spirituality as the immanent experimental pragmatic response to problems seems limited. Participation with it is limited to those that have some capacity – some considerable empowerment – to enter into the domains of problems.

The experience of alienation, associated with periods of enclosure and as much with deproletarianization and postcolonial states as with industrialization and colonialism, engenders a condition of separation from shared sense (Blencowe et al. 2015; Read 2011). This is not the condition of the vanquished or disenfran-chised (who know what is wrong with the world but not how to change it). Aliena-tion is a condition that is profoundly manifest in a sense of not even knowing or being able to say *what* is wrong, what matters, what is the real. UKIP, Trump and their ilk are mastering arts of speaking to this condition. UKIP offer *noth-ing* in the way of problem-solving capacity – indeed, they wear their technical incompetence and political inexperience as a matter of pride. What they do offer in abundance is vengeful narrative that composes shared sense. Naming immigra-tion and Islam as "problems" does nothing to empower anyone or solve anything, but it does have a dis-alienating effect for some – attaching problems to names and luring alienated subjects into a fantastical sense of the real.

Can the intrusion of Gaia counter such spells? If the intrusion of Gaia offers a political spirituality of problem-solving, then its reach seems limited to activists, scientists, "concerned citizens": categories of people that are immensely impor-tant, but that also exclude. But this foreboding figure – this indifferent, intolerant, chaotic, Mother Earth – might open out additional directions. This theological figure might also comprise a powerful, unearthly, *image*, provoking experience of dissociation, composing a montage with life.

The image of Gaia as an indifferent and unpredictable deity who intrudes in, interrupts, our reality – and a seemingly spiritual embrace of encounter with chaos – resonates with the aesthetic tradition of montage, embracing the creative shock of discord. Whilst this echoes the machismo of the modernist avant-garde, it resonates more powerfully still with shamanic arts of healing. Shamanic prac-tice is not simply so many technics for resolving problems, or normalizing states, but is often aimed to provide healing when the source of illness is unknown and unnamed (Margree 2004; Taussig 1987; Anzaldúa 2015). This is achieved not only through the composition of spaces and relations of trust but also through the immersion of subjects in strange and disorienting visions, alternate realities, the edge of psychosis. Trance states are cultivated through ritual, music, chants, dance and drugs – composing surreal montage with life. The sick might look to trance visions for revelations of truth – but the shaman knows that there is no truth to find. The shaman knows that it is not in "discovering the truth" that our healing lies (Taussig 1987). The healing power of the shaman derives from the capacity to exist between alternate and contradicting worlds, to resist the resolution of real-ity into a singularity – a world that could be monopolized by any set of knowers

(Anzaldúa 2015). Often times healing is achieved through accepting into the self the shadows and projections, the othered "evils", that have been created through our own and others' fears, judgments and attempts to control (Starhawk 1999; Anzaldúa 2015). These healing arts do not assume a subjectivity floating free of limits but incorporate insight into the powers of trickery and slippage that can encounter, embrace and disrupt the unknown.

Instead, or alongside, the tradition of pragmatism – of Whitehead and Dewey – we might think Stengers and the theological figures that her writing invokes, as part of a longstanding anti-fascist aesthetic tradition of montage and healing arts. The intrusion of Gaia is a surreal and chaos-inducing image. In terms of aesthetics, this resonates with practices of surrealism. Whilst this may be "art", it does not attempt to "name a problem" or represent truth but rather to compose spaces of immersion, disorientation, trance and energy, through which new (and old and silenced) compositions of bodies and powers might emerge.

Stengers points out there is reason to be suspicious of surrealism as a movement associated with a European avant-garde, which might be appropriating, rather than really engaging shamanic tradition. However, such suspicion need not extend to *popular* forms of surrealism, which have been composed in resistance to and often joyful abandonment of avant garde pretention. The characterization of surrealism's relationship with magic as "appropriation", or of its modernism as "triumphant", is far from obvious if we look beyond Europe to the broader surrealist movement. For example, we might look to Suzanne Césaire, a surrealist poet and teacher who was writing in Martinique around the time of World War II and who cultivated a surrealist community in relay with Anton Breton, her husband Aimé and others. Using the forms of surrealist art and an implicit dark humor to get around the colonial censors, she and fellow writers drew on African tradition and imagery alongside that of modernism to critique the colonial condition and cultivate anti-colonial poetics. She called for a "new art" that would leave man "fragile and dependent" whilst opening up "unsuspected possibilities . . . in the very spectacle of things ignored and silenced" (Césaire 2012: 17). This is art as entry into the "realm of the strange . . . the marvellous, and the fantastic, which people of a certain taste hold in contempt" (2012: 17). Her spirit is evoked in D. Scot Miller's 2009 "Manifesto of the Afro-Surreal", which declares:

> Afro-Surrealists restore the cult of the past. We revisit old ways with new eyes. . . . We re-introduce "madness" as visitations from the gods, and acknowledge the possibility of magic. We take up the obsessions of the ancients and kindle the dis-ease, clearing the murk of the collective unconsciousness as it manifests in these dreams called culture.
>
> (Scot Miller 2009)

Whatever art annuals might declare, the surreal is a popular form. The surrealism of the Césaires fed into Negritude and helped shape the aesthetic of Black Power and Afro-futurism as well as Afro-surrealism, feminism and Punk. The surreal is manifold, and this is less about intellectual lineage than it is about art and aesthetic

form as expression of, and response to, common experience. Scot Miller claims that "all 'others' who create from their actual, lived experience are surrealist, as per Frieda Kahlo" (2009).[5] Proletarian surrealist modernism infuses global dance culture, from Ska to Punk to Drum'n'Bass to Grime. Dance culture, like carnival, cultivates experiences that intertwine aspects of live montage – mind altering substances, music and crowds, clashing images, immersion, confusion, joy. Alongside popular religious movements that emphasize immersive experiences, dance and spirit healing, we can see such space as existent sites of popular healing, dancing toward the recomposition of matters in every sense. What's more, such spaces have been among the most radically inclusive and generative of anti-racist spirit.

To conclude then – the promise (or not) of the intrusion of Gaia and the spiritualizing experience invoked by climatic catastrophe – for a popular politics that could face our despair might rest upon the capacity of this image to compose or resonate within surreal spaces; to participate in the healing arts of unlearning and disorientation; and to collaborate with dancing bodies in the creation wholly new/old magical resonance machines.

Notes

* This is a truncated version of a paper previously published, under creative commons licence, as Ecological Attunement in a Theological Key: Adventures in Anti-fascist Aesthetics' *GeoHumanities* 2(1), 24–41 in 2016.
1 Suzanne Cesaire "Martinican poetry will be cannibal or it will not be"
2 Witch hunting reached its peak between 1580 and 1630 (Federici 2005)
3 For an ethnographic material on the way that the anti-brand make-do-and-mend aesthetic of dominant figures in Occupy London was excluding and difficult for some working-class participants, see Sam Burgum (2015).
4 See also Phillip Goodchild (2002).
5 Frieda Kahlo is widely regarded as one of the great surrealist artists, but she said "they thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality".

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14 Visiting artists with Latour

The materiality of artistic practices and the claims of critical theory

Christoph Henning

In the following I will use some insights of Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour for practical social research from an emancipatory perspective. I will apply their theories to analyze some interviews we conducted with artists and designers in Switzerland.[1] This application also works the other way around: reading these interviews as "expert texts" demonstrates how much sense some ideas of Latour and Bennett make in certain contexts. Ironically, with this these authors come to the rescue of critical theory, which ended up in a dead end in the 21st century. This reading of new materialist approaches reverses the usual order of things: interviews explain theory, and new materialism salvages critical theory (instead of bashing it).

One of the main fields of critical theory in the 20th century was aesthetics. In writings from Lukács and Bloch, Benjamin and Adorno to Marcuse and Rancière,[2] and also in recent works of Charles Taylor and Hartmut Rosa (in this volume), the fine arts as well as literature, drama and music are considered to be the few remaining practices where the one-dimensional rationality of commodification and instrumentalization has not yet taken full control. Therefore, by turning to the arts we may find some glimpses of a better life, some memory of a fuller human existence or less alienated ways of connecting – with other people, with nature and with our own selves more truthfully. For some readers this may look as a re-enchantment (Bennett 2001; Federici 2018), but more profanely it can also be understood as an effort to appreciate things as they are in and for themselves, not as we want them to be – in their inherent being, not their instrumental value.[3] In other words, it is an enterprise not only in the good life but also in aesthetics and ontology. This move cannot be restricted to (genuine) perceptions; it also aspires to an *ontology*: we need to learn how things really *are* if we want to tell genuine perceptions from alienated ones.

The trouble with critical theory: its distance to the arts and materialities of practice

This alliance between emancipatory theory and aesthetic practices, however, is not as easy today as it once was. The problem comes with recent trends in both theory and practice. Practically speaking, whereas among its commercialization

the art market had also allowed for an autonomy of the arts since the 18th century, making it less dependent on the taste of the nobility or clergy, in recent years it has seen a tremendous financialization which has put that autonomy in danger. Art has become a financial asset, and prices for some artists' work have skyrocketed. At the same time, with the constant weakening of local institutions and a loss of social security, life as an artist has become ever more precarious (Manske 2016). Hence, instead of representing the life of an unconventional bohemia in the niches of society, of an un-alienated lifestyle in harmony with the forces around us, the figure of the artist now rather stands for another, not-so-comfortable neoliberal trend: for an entrepreneurial mentality, including a self-chosen poverty and mate-rial insecurity. According to some sociologists (Menger 2014; McRobbie 2016), the figure of "the artist" has become a role model for flexible labor: they are supposed to be self-motivated, self-employed, risk-taking and business-minded; bluntly speaking, they are only "creative" in a neoliberal understanding.

Consequently, in critical social theory you no longer find an easy alliance with the arts for practical reasons (Rancière 2013 is the exception). Yet there are *theo-retical* reasons for that as well. According to Boltanski and Chiapello (1999), the new spirit of capitalism has consumed what used to be critical in the "artistic critique" and transformed it into a "productive force" for a neoliberal reforma-tion of capitalism. In the lofty field of pure theory it is hard to argue against this influential narrative (in my experience, terms like "autonomy", "authenticity", "self-realization" or "responsibility" are often quickly aspersed as pure neolib-eral ideology, which throws the baby out with the bath water). So we, a group of researchers based in Switzerland, decided to talk to artists and creative workers about this – talk to them, not about them, just to stress that difference. We were interested in their way of life, their work ethos and their everyday practices, in order to see how much tenacity against the neoliberal appropriation of creativity, against the commercialization of art, we would find. We conducted 20 qualitative interviews with the artists and creative workers, a body of material that fills 700 pages.

The next step then was to interpret these interviews in a way that somehow answered our initial question: can critical theory still rely on the field of the arts and aesthetics in order to criticize contemporary society? What can we learn from the arts today, especially from the way artists and designers work and live? In this process, however, another theoretical problem arose. One very influential sociol-ogy of art, the work of Bourdieu (1996), tells us that what real actors articulate is not to be misread naively as a description of their actual practices but rather needs to be deciphered as an effect of the *field* of art – an articulation of the rules of the game, determined by social expectations, by a bourgeois class habitus with aristo-cratic aspirations and by endemic narratives that have been circulating in the field of the arts since the mid-19th century in France.

Hence, actors unconsciously articulate an "illusio" that needs to be "objecti-fied" by the experts. For critical theory this is bad news. Even if artists and design-ers articulate something that is in line with their approach, it is reminiscent of a crime thriller: this kind of "evidence" cannot be used in court; the usual suspects

need to be released. For in a Bourdieusian mindset, people do not know what they talk about. An enlightened social researcher must not take actors in the field too seriously; particularly, he must not believe any "narrative" that philosophy of art has spun around these experiences. So we have at least three reasons why the coalition between critical theory and the arts has broken down: the arts underwent a financialist makeover; in the eyes of "advanced" social theories they lost their critical teeth and became motor and mentor for neoliberal flexibilization; and sociologies of art have debunked a faith in the otherness of the arts as mere myth and illusion – its real yet unconscious function being social distinction.

How reassessing the power of "things" can help

New materialism is politically ambivalent (see Moss 2017; Wolfe 2017; Rekret 2018). Here, however, it is applied in a particular way in favor of emancipatory perspectives: it offers a chance to re-release the critical potential of social theory by having a fresh look at practices and their ecologies, their entanglement with materials of a different kind that were abstracted away by earlier approaches in critical theory. New materialism is embraced as a *practice* of doing research, putting into brackets for a moment its metaphysical shortcomings and political ambivalences. This has advantages. A perspective on art that wants to get over the shortcomings of recent critical theories needs to overcome the following two restrictions: first, the purely immanent perspective of recent critical theory, where "immanence" means immanent to the dominant *social norms*, as read from the perspective of the academic (e.g., Honneth 2012: 59ff.; Honneth 2014: 5f.; that is not the Deleuzian understanding of immanence); second, and related to that, the restriction of "social" analysis to intersubjective relations, which ignores the wide-ranging and diverse relations people can have to all kinds of other beings or entities around them, or the forces acting inside, between or through themselves (for this, see Bennett 2010). In the following, this chapter follows the skepticism Latour has articulated against Bourdieu's approach in the sociology of art in a pragmatic way. Using it empirically allows overcoming the obstacles of criticism posed by both Boltanski/Chiapello and Honneth and Habermas: it salvages "artistic critique" against the suspicion of complicity with neoliberalism, and it puts material processes of work back at the forefront of critical analysis.

Bourdieu's strategy of "scientific objectification" tried to debunk ordinary people's "sacramental rites of cultural devotion" (Bourdieu 1996: 184), particularly the field-specific "illusio", defined as a "recognition of the game and the utility of the game" (ibid.: 172). Going to galleries, watching and interpreting works of art, talking about it, showing esteem for aesthetic values and being creative oneself – these art-related practices are treated as a "game" based on certain unrealistic assumptions. For Bourdieu, these beliefs only "conceal" the real things: "real" meaning "social" or intersubjective here. His use of a religious vocabulary in the cultural context ("conversion", "the sacred", etc.) indicates Bourdieu's disenchanting intentions: just as in religion, so in the art world, too, "genetic sociology" (ibid.: 292) needs to *demystify* people's beliefs in the genuine values of art and

their aesthetic experiences. By this, Bourdieu reduces people's ontology to a few "things" made of nothing but social relations – competition, envy and striving for social status. That is the reduction Latour opposes: "critical sociology . . . not only *limits* itself to the social, but *replaces* the object to be studied with another matter made *of* social relations" (Latour 2005: 9). This position is understood as a paternalistic devaluation and disregard of people's experiences (cf. Celikates 2019): they seem to be wrong, either because they cannot see clearly (i.e., they are cognitively somewhat limited) or because they conceal their real motives (i.e., their intentions are dubious). Latour protests against this disenchanting disposition:

> If you are listening to what people are saying, they will explain at length how and why they are deeply *attached, moved, affected* by the works which "make them" feel things. Impossible! Forbidden! To be affected is supposed to be mere affectation. . . . [P]eople are made to delude themselves . . . they are transmogrified, once more, into believers!
>
> (Latour 2005: 236)

Deducting the exuberant polemic, Latour's correct observation is that genetic knowledge is not always destructive. Why should an esteem of something (which is not automatically a "fetishization") be diminished as soon as we get to know how this something came about? Consider a loving couple that knows pretty well how they met and why they love each other. Why should this undermine their mutual feelings? Why should we not imagine something like a "positive genealogy" (Joas 2013), a knowledge of the history of things that *supports* our respect and care for them, instead of evaporating them into the dust of social construction?

Latour's blueprint for this affirmative approach is the Catholic religion: it looks back to a long history and has found a way to include some knowledge of tradition into its practices of worship (Latour 2013: 303ff., cf. Rosa in this volume; the orthodoxy, however, was not immune to modern historical and critical research). It is not by coincidence that Latour has developed his "ontological" aspirations less in his laboratory studies (which he usually shoves to the foreground) but rather in the field of religion and the arts, where colleagues like Heinich (1998), Gomart and Hennion (1999) or Hennion (2010) had made a similar point already: here we can find people's "confessions" of beliefs in genuine values most openly. (Our interviews found them as well.) And interestingly, in order to interpret them alternatively and non-reductively, Latour brings in *philosophy* as a tool to overcome Bourdieu's sociological reductionism:

> How could enquirers listen to a housewife, a clerk, a pilgrim, a criminal, a soprano, and a CEO and still succeed in following what they express if they had no Hegel, no Aristotle, no Nietzsche, no Dewey, no Whitehead to help them!? . . . cutting the social sciences from the reservoirs of philosophical innovation is a recipe to make sure that no one will ever notice the metaphysical innovations proposed by ordinary actors. . . . And the situation will be even worse if social scientists . . . take as their duty to cling to the most

limited list of agencies, ceaselessly translating the indefinite production of actors into their short one.

<div align="right">(Latour 2005: 51)</div>

As a result, we not only get another social science, we also get a new approach to philosophy that is methodologically innovative. The term "ontology" may sound traditional: it has been a key discipline from Aristotle up to Kant, and major ontologies have been written even in the 20th century (consider Sartre, Nicolai Hartmann or Georg Lukács). Yet with Latour, we no longer need to lock ourselves up in an iron cage of abstraction while writing ontology. Rather, philosophers are encouraged to participate in empirical research and listen to people on the street, in the lab or in the studio (an ethics of listening as suggested by Charles Taylor), to take ordinary life, everyday experiences and expressions seriously (which was already a key idea in phenomenology and Wittgensteinian thinking). But while they do this, they remain philosophers and "map" the beings they encounter.

   In this line of thinking, interpreting our interviews with artists and creative workers still needs to consider the social frames of life as an artist (family social-ization, markets for recognition in society etc.) in a Bourdieusian way. But in order to understand life as an artist, we also need a broader ontological spec-trum: experiences with paintings (Bredekamp 2017) and artistic materials (tools, colors, subject matter, etc.) are as important as the immersion in one's own per-ceptions or even those of others. Why should these dimensions be abstracted away? Why should we cancel them out and substitute them with something else? If the researcher is open toward those ontological dimensions while interpret-ing the interviews, aesthetic experiences regain the importance they have for the actors (and already had for the phenomenology of art, as in Moritz Geiger, Roman Ingarden or Nicolai Hartmann 1953, or art historians like Lange-Berndt 2015 or Lehmann 2013). The values and critical insights that are often associated with works of art or aesthetic experiences of the beholder (aesthetics of reception) can then also be located within the aesthetic practices themselves (see Hesmondhalgh 2010).

   All in all, then, there are four reasons why a Latourian approach can be an ally for critical theory when it comes to practices of creative work. First, it advocates a "pragmatic sociology" according to which people are the experts of their own lives. Hence sociologists should not patronize them about the meaning of their lives and practices, nor change their stories into other, much more abstract ver-sions that rely on objects other than the ones people describe. Second, by taking people's experiences seriously, we get another perspective on the objects in ques-tion. Here, in the experiences of normal actors, not in an abstract philosophical discourse, we find evidence for the much-debated claim about the co-agency of objects. Thirdly, even though Latour's own expertise is in the field of science and technology studies (STS), one of the areas where such an agency is most evi-dent is art (and it might be useful to talk to artists about that). Fourth and finally, in trying to vindicate this agency of things and networks that is evident in our experiences, not only in the arts, Latour vindicates philosophy against Bourdieu's

anti-ontological crusade. This allows the perception of a certain "resonance" between traditional philosophical theories and real experiences.

Vibrant matter: resonating with materials in artistic practices

> What I would miss the most is to watch how the things evolve.
>
> (A designer)

Now it is time to elaborate what the artists and designers actually told us. The first example is a quote from the beginning of an interview, where Jane, an artist in her late thirties, by then at least locally more or less established, tells us about her earlier career as an artist.

> So, I got into the preparatory class and at first, I was a bit nervous, you know, going away [from home, CH]. But then I felt quite comfortable there, because I was with people who had the same interests. That opened another world for me. And it is quite a secluded story, to paint, it is always, well – it is hard to communicate, it is not easy to work together, it is something where you are completely separated. And for me, for a very long time it was, like, an encounter with the world, because I did not follow the academic career – for me it is also an effort to establish a different perspective on stuff.
>
> (Jane)

This biographic outline is full of information. First, of course there is a social context in the usual sense: to enter the sphere of art means to enter another social milieu, another group. But when Jane calls art another "world", that does not only mean other *people*. She is dealing with another *cosmos* that is also filled with "stuff" ("*Zeug*" in a Heideggerian sense). What is that stuff? In what followed, we learn that it is material (paper, color, brushes, pictures) but also the stuff of ordinary life as seen from another perspective.

　Note the order of things here. It is not a Bourdieusian sociality that "constructs" a new object. Rather the opposite: it is the changed perspective on the stuff that allows for a new community, also with other people (though that proves difficult). Dealing with the stuff often is a solitary experience (everybody is for him- or herself, it is hard to even communicate or cooperate; an insight already articulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt: "loneliness and freedom"). Yet, you are not alone, you are with the objects. Hence the new group of artists ("people who have the same interests") is constituted by the experience that their colleagues live in the same world of objects, they make similar experiences. You do not have to be in a constant mode of joined or shared intentions (Michael Bratman) to experience this. It only means that the priority of dealing with stuff is socially buffered by the certainty that there are others living in the same way, making similar experiences, which may assure you that you are not completely out of line. This is a

background function, not a constitutive one. The mainstage is reserved for the challenges set by the material.

In other sections, our interview partner Jane explains that dealing with material still is the most important practice, even though by now she has acquired a lot of social capital: "And this immersion has always been central to me", an immersion particularly "into other languages", "languages of pictures". Being with the objects is central to her, and from what she says the social recognition that does or does not follow from this activity is less important for her. Even while she does what is necessary to survive economically in the art world (trying to sell pictures, making contacts, in short, self-marketing), she does not consider that the core of her activity.

The interesting question now is: what happens between her and the "stuff"? The stuff in question deserves a closer look: what plays a role here? First of all, there are pictures – to begin with: pictures by others. Jane is clearly moved by them, this being one of her motives: "I simply love those pictures, and in the museum, I had the feeling I really understand that, somehow I understand it". This first engagement with the pictures by others (see Bredekamp 2017) is important to explain why she has become an artist herself, *against* the pressure of her family that pushed somewhere else and against an art world she experienced as closed. In her life as an artist they (who are prominent in the standard sociological picture) seem less important. Being an artist herself now, it is rather her working materials that are the co-working objects. But what exactly are they *doing*? During the creative process she interacts with the materials; they are far more than mere tools or instruments. What she reports about this interaction is stunning. Here is a section on her experiences with color, brush and paper:

> The paper curves itself in a way, well, that bodies, or the spreading of the color, well it already happens, it meets the paper halfway, in a quite reduced way, the application of the color happens by itself.
>
> (Jane)

Many things happen while or even before the artist even starts to act consciously: the canvas curves itself in order to meet the colors, the color spreads itself on the canvas. The picture partly paints itself. At the least the artist, who should know, ascribes part of the activity to the material. To be clear, this is more than what Heidegger ascribes to the hammer: according to him, using a hammer opens a new perspective, particularly on stuff, and also melds with the actor (Harman 2002). But in Jane's case, the material itself becomes co-active. During this activity, other agents come to play a part as well; even space and time blend into this assemblage. Here is Jane's description of the "epiphany of interspaces" (Taylor 1992: 476) that is evolving:

> It is like a formation of time, or also of rhythm in a way. And it simply is a huge space, well, if I am in the atelier alone, in a way you are – it is like a

space you have, in which you move, and if that grows bigger, then you simply have to – well, I cannot describe that precisely.

(Jane)

The artist experiences a heterotopia she cannot fully control. Yet it is not a threatening one; rather she is used to it and has developed a certain mastery in this process. Yet mastery here does not mean control: as in sailing, you are exposed to forces you can only react to (cf. Ingold 2013: 21f., 127f.); nevertheless, you can learn to deal with them in a better way.

Yet there is one more actor involved: the works of art themselves, or rather the possibilities of that artwork that the material foreshadows and which the resulting work of art may or may not match adequately. Thus, working with the material is no mere "play", as Schiller once indicated, it rather is a struggle. (Adorno described something similar.) The artist tells us that only one out of ten pictures succeed or "function". To make sense of such a failure of a work of art, we need to distinguish the concrete artwork from its intrinsic possibilities, which are present and non-present at the same time. For this reason, classical art-theories of Erwin Panofsky, Nicolai Hartmann or Roman Ingarden have added yet another layer to the assemblage: the layer of meaning. The artist tells us that she physically experiences this ("immaterial" or "spiritual") layer. This has repercussions for the ontology of the artwork: it consists of several layers that are irreducible to one another. When the artist further describes this dimension, she uses a language of "thinking": there are rules and patterns here that function like a language (as Walter Benjamin [1996] suggested a "language of things"), but this language cannot be translated into formal speech:

"painting is like another way of thinking".
"Painting has the ability to appeal to something general, for someone, and to touch that somehow".
"It is really about something very general".

(Jane)

The position that painting is a kind of thinking was also formulated in art theories by Arnheim (1969) or Merleau-Ponty (1964). Artists are not exposing "private" feelings or mental states but rather communicating in another way. Even the emotions involved belong to the "general" content of the pictures or artworks. And it is exactly this expressive function that can function – or fail. This is what the struggle with the material is about: the final form of the artwork can match (or miss) the one that was prefigured and anticipated during the process.

Resonating with materials in design practices

Now one may wonder whether this artist is old-fashioned or an exception: maybe her statements only show some obsolete conceptions that are no longer

representative? According to pop theory and high-gloss art-magazines, the creative industries and international art scenes have moved beyond such romantic ideas. They now work collectively: project-driven, experimental and entrepreneurial, they no longer produce artworks but merely expose objects that are transformed into art by the public (Reckwitz 2017). This fancy conception, however, does not hold for the bulk of artists and creative workers who are not celebrities and top earners. This can be demonstrated by looking into the field of design, which is much closer to economic practices, but where actors show a similar behavior. Once sensitized for this dimension, a look at the interviews reveals that Jane, the artist, is no exception. James for example, an independent designer in his mid-forties, shares with us how his design processes take place. Just like Jane above, he reports how important it is to be attentive to the characteristics of the materials. In this, the material is not merely passive:

> I get the manuscript and I bring that into a form, another form, so I try to make it more legible. I try to find an appropriate format, an appropriate font, an appropriate type size. All of these are forms, and they have vibrations, vibrations that can appeal to you or not.
>
> (James)

Unlike in the arts, in design processes the assigned task and the relevant material are somewhat preset: the script comes in ("I get the manuscript"), and now the designer must trim it, bring it in shape. Often the authors of the text already articulate some vague ideas about the design they have in mind. Concerning the question of co-acting with the material, however, this somewhat restricted aesthetic autonomy does not reduce the inter-action. Knowing the authors face-to-face, our designer can relate to the content and the aesthetic visions. There seems to evolve a resonance that is felt, not so much between "object" and "subject" (as in Rosa 2019) but rather between various things (inter-objective): between form and content, or between the "vibrations" both emit. Something "fits" or "matches" if both have found their balance ("at some point you realize: yes, now it fits", reports another designer). The designer finds himself amid these inter-objective tuning processes. James describes one example from his aesthetic practice:

> A terrific text, I received it early, to get a taste. And I felt, this one needs to be music to the ears (laughing), it must be a convenient read. And we knew, there will be a picture section we can mix in. And then it simply is about materiality, what kind of paper, which font do we take, how do we arrange things on the page, which color should the paper have, what should the introduction look like – should it maybe have a. . . ? [incomprehensible] Which color do we want at the outside, should it be a half-linen booklet, and how should it feel? Should it be soft, so you would like to touch it and then, well, you can just read it more easily? And also, it would be nice to have a ribbon, as a bookmark. – That's how it goes.
>
> (James)

To design then means to make the form consistent with the content, to elaborate a consonance between the text and its meaning. Interestingly, both of them seem to emit some kind of sound or vibration. The designer then needs to harmonize the sounds of form and content into a consonance:

> Then we try out different fonts, until we find: "this one does have the right sound, the proper tonality for this". It is funny, the amount of details that in the end yields such an accord [Gesamtklang].
>
> (James)

Another text-designer (she is in her early thirties, part-time self-employed, part-time salaried) compares this "harmony" between form and content, between shape and meaning, with a language. Once such an interlock has been found, moments of joy result. To describe this bliss, she finds metaphors, comparing the long desired "fit" between form and content with the actors of spring, where the air, the birds etc. form something together:

> This really interests me, it is like the evolution of a new language, something you did not have in your mind before, you did not know what it would become, but you can elaborate it. This creation, the search for, for a feeling; it is like, well, in the spring, to see the first flowers. It is this feeling, wow, now everything fits together. These are the moments you are searching for, also in the rest of your life. Just like in the spring: yes, the air is beautiful, and how I hear the blackbirds – just like that, to create these moments, where everything is coherent.
>
> (Eve)

Examples like these indicate that a co-operation of materials is also experienced in design-practices that are much closer to the market, which move beyond "pure" art. Thus, the question resurfaces how designers order the inner and the outer spheres of their activity. Our artists framed market relations as a kind of foreign policy (a necessary but exhausting and heteronomous activity), whereas their artistic activities were considered the core, the inner mounting flame. Given that social relations are much more essential in designer jobs, it is not self-evident that people should feel the same here. In design processes, we often have additional social actors: clients exert considerable economic power and even have a say in creative decisions; colleagues and offices-mates sometimes even work on the same project. What impact does that have on the interaction with the material? We can easily imagine cases where bad relations "crowd out" the inherent joy of working with the materials. However, when asked what he liked most about his job, James answers with a complex arrangement that shows that the delight of the material still shines through:

> It is the joy when something can emerge, when a transformation occurs and that works out, when it comes out fine. This is something, on the one hand

> I really find that beautiful. On the other hand, it is a real privilege to get together with all kinds of clients and to get into this material, and get inspired by it. And thus, to get to know another world. This is among the greatest things. It is almost like flying.
>
> (James)

Social contexts are experienced as enriching as long as (or because) they are also enhancing the contact and interaction with different materials. Again, we observe a primacy of material interactions above social intercourse, at least in evaluative terms. Even if one should hesitate to draw that conclusion too hastily, at least we can no longer neglect the impact of materialities for the meaning of creative activities. They have the power to mitigate and mediate intersubjective dynamics.

In conclusion, reconsider our point of departure. We began with the pitfalls of a critical theory that relied on a seemingly "outdated" concept of the arts and artists that no longer seemed to apply, neither to a financialized world of art nor to the flexible market of creative labor. This suggested that artists who still believe that art functions in a romantic way are doomed to remain in precarity, and in order to beautify this sad experience of self-exploitation, they delude themselves into believing that what they do is somehow meaningful for society. Social theory, it seemed, could therefore no longer work with the tension between art and society. Rather we need to speak of an "aesthetic capitalism" (de la Fuente and Murphy 2014; Boehme 2017; Reckwitz 2017). This is the narrative this chapter argues against. In a reading inspired by Bennett and Latour, artists can be said to cherish their field for good reasons that are based *not* in old-fashioned narratives but in practices of everyday life: they experience another kind of sociality – a kind of inter-action with materials and ideas, and an "interspace" of transformed time and space. Based on these experiences one can claim that the sphere of aesthetics is a field that works on an ontologically and practically different level than do the markets in which they are embedded. Art works are not just commodities but much more than this (put in Marxist terms, the commodity form can be said to piggyback on works of art and the appreciation they demand). Aesthetic value can go along with economic value but is not reducible to it; aesthetic production is not reducible to its economic aspects. Art is not neutralizing the market, but neither is it consumed by it. Hence, though a critical theory does need to be vigilant regarding the power of neoliberalism to appropriate critical energies, in the field of aesthetics it has not been as almighty as some social theories want to make us believe. (Hence it is not "neoliberal" to stick to the esteem of aesthetic experiences or authenticity.) Even if they are embedded into markets more deeply today, the arts still work in a different and potentially nonconformist way. Of course, this does not work automatically, there are many examples for expensive artworks that have become "identical" in Adorno's understanding. But that is not always the case. Art works and artistic practices can still initiate heterotopies that allow for a certain detachment from the contemporary world of self-destructive turbo-capitalism. Not only in the world of imagination but much more concretely

as a form of life with its own materiality-entangled practices, the arts still have the power to inspire and reinforce a critical theory of society.

Notes

1 See Henning, Thomä and Schultheis 2019.
2 See Henning 2017.
3 This "ethics of authenticity" of ourselves, but also of things, was an evident motive in Rousseau, in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, and in the phenomenological movement. It is still a driving force for Rosa (2019).

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15 Materialism, energy and acceleration

New materialism versus critical theory on the momentum of modernity

Elmar Flatschart

Critical materiality in the 21st century

We are living in an *age of crises*. When Hobsbawm famously described the 20th century as the "age of extremes" (Hobsbawm 1995) in 1994, he analyzed the aggravation of modernity's contradictions and foresaw many crisis-prone developments. The last 25 years have however made it clear that crises are upon us. Since the world economic crisis of 2008, positive interpretations of a capitalist "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992) have been seriously diluted. New conflicts and the rise of old (right-wing) ideologies – be it in a new guise – are shaking international and national politics, and the representative democratic system of government has lost much of its former indisputability in a post-democratic condition (Crouch 2005). Finally, and most strikingly, we see that our relation to nature is also in crisis as climate change is progressing and our planetary system is altered by humankind in an unprecedented way, a condition that is rightfully labeled "Anthropocene" (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000) or maybe better "Capitalocene" (Altvater 2016; Flatschart 2017; Moore 2014).

Culturally, this change has been echoed by the crisis of what I would call the *post-condition*. With this I mean that the poststructuralist turn and its "postmodern", relativist view on culture has lost much of its momentum but cannot be overcome. The meta-theoretical orientation and its methodological implications – actualist and atomist foci on the particular and ignorance for the "larger picture" – have led to an impasse of critical reflection on the serious changes affecting (post-)modernity. Yet, there seems to lead no way back to the old modernist "grand narratives" that dominated much of the 20th century. The result is a serious discontent that many – especially younger – thinkers feel. In it, the general uneasiness and precariousness of the "millennial generation" resonates. Unlike 20 years ago, the lack of solid foundations seems to produce some sort of uneasiness and discomfort.

It is this crisis of the post-condition that fueled the newest ontological turn that culminated in the self-labeled *New Materialism* (NM). I uphold the thesis that its rise as well as its ambivalent, unfinished and voluntarily undefined state is itself a symptom of the current historical development of our material conditions. NM

is an expression of the prevalent *Zeitgeist* from which we can learn but it is no suitable approach to understand the larger societal and natural conditions we are facing in the 21st century. As I will show, it is especially unsuitable to connect the historical and natural aspects of the age of crises.

Departing from a critique of NM and with this thesis in mind, I reach out to the *older materialist tradition* that upheld a distinctive critical theory. I will argue that Hartmut Rosa's theory of acceleration is a potential candidate for an updated critical theory. In its discussion, I will uncover its strength but also a weakness: the underdeveloped understanding of nature. In order to amend this lacuna, I will present a Frankfurt School–inspired understanding of society-nature relations that highlights the crucial role of *energy as a social relation*. Developing an understanding of the intrinsic connection of fossil energy and capitalist accelerationism, I will conclude with a short outlook on the current crisis of the materiality of energy.

From new materialisms back to critical theory: five shades of critical materiality

This volume contains many – both positive and critical – takes on NM, and I myself presented a more comprehensive perspective on this tradition elsewhere (Flatschart 2013). I will therefore confine myself here to a problem-centered discussion of NM. NM opened up the discussion on materiality by bringing up central meta-theoretical problems that are noteworthy. Some of these problems can be aligned toward a *fivefold problem-complex* that has a consecutive and emergent character and is relevant for problematizing NM vis-à-vis a critical theory of society and nature. This complex features the problems of (a) dualities, (b) categories, (c) nature, (d) historicity and (e) criticality.

Dualities

NM's strong critique of dualisms[1] is a heritage of poststructuralism. The latter was throughout troubled by the purported logocentric (Derrida 2004a: 41) and Cartesian heritage of Western philosophy and critiqued the dual opposition that ultimately relates to the separation of subject and object. The *deconstruction of dualities* was not proposing any new ontology but rather performatively expanding the "in-between", the *différance* of dualities (Derrida 2004b: 164) in a sort of "negative relationality" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012d: 125) that ultimately depended on a certain notion of discourse. Against this epistemological and discursivist reductionism and subject-object dualism, NM proposes a third position: an "ontological ground that prefigures and makes possible relations between subjects, and between subjects and objects" (Grosz 2005: 5). This amounts to a *monist ontology* that radically objects to any sort of opposition, most notably the one between the material and the ideal as a precondition for the separation of an (inanimate) object and an (animate) subject (Barad 2007: 130). This "agential realism" questions that there can be any-thing that is not an

"agent" (Barad 2007: 151) – thus jettisoning the crucial sociological division of structure and agency.

Categories

While the agential and monist conception of a "vital materiality" (Gulshan 2012: 42) may be contested on many levels, I will focus on the problematic fusion of the ontic and epistemic, the material and the discursive, in a "material-discursive" (Barad 2003: 810). The latter lacks any means to distinguish between referent and reference. While poststructuralism highlighted the contingent character of the relation of both, it still maintained the categories as such. NM is again more radical, as it upholds radical contingency but intends to go beyond the discursive. In its "intra-actions" of matter (Barad 2007: 97ff), it introduces relations without relata (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012c: 69). The assumption of a – contingent – intra-action of the discursive and the material effectively means that we mustn't separate them, not even discursively. The discursive is as material as the material is discursive. This also implies that all our categories for referring to both the material and the discursive are contingent. I maintain that language, speaking about some-thing, requires us to distinguish different levels. To uphold relations is a temporal, cognitive and perceptual necessity and defines our understanding of agency versus structures. If I speak about "agent A" I cannot equate it with speaking about "structure A*". This regularly implies a causal relation between A and A*, in any case there is a *relation* between A and A*. NM objects to this kind of relation as it doesn't want to see A and A* separated. The relationality of A and A* implies a duality (A and A*), yet NM seeks their monist fusion. But how, then, do we even speak of A and A*? NM solves this problem by introducing new categories, like that of a "dynamic relationality" (Barad 2007: 93). A cunning observer might again ask – how do these new categories *relate* to each other, what would be a category-theoretical "structure" that helps us to classify them? We are told that they don't, as it is all about a "nomadic traversing" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012e: 100) that produces "cartography rather than classification" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012e: 110). It is evident that NM is no master of systematicity and clarity but rather intrigues by the idiosyncratic character of its neologisms and a celebration of "indetermination" (Grosz 2010: 150). Due to this open espousal of indeterminacy, it offers no criteria for critique and is thus immune to any (immanent) questioning of its "cartographies".

Nature

Among the most crucial determinants of our categorical systems and practices – in particular the ones we call *science* – are those relating to nature. It used to be a mainstay of the natural sciences that they differ from the social sciences because "social objects are irreducible to (and really emergent from) natural objects, and so possess qualitatively different features from them" (Bhaskar 1998: 22). One of the central features of natural objects that distinguishes them from social objects

is their pre-existence. The natural is divided from the social as it exists prior to and independent from it; a natural world without a social world is possible – but not vice versa. The social is determined by natural (preconditioning) properties. *Objectivity*, that is, the relation toward objects, is thus different with natural and social objects, especially because we (ourselves "social objects") can distinguish ourselves from natural objects but not from social objects. Such distinctions and the idea of emergence are heavily contested by NM. Barad's notion of *intra-activity*, for example, is proposing that there is no such separation; she maintains a "posthumanist understanding that does not presume the human to be a special system separate from the natural processes that he or she observes, but rather one that seeks to understand the emergence of the 'human' along with all other physical systems" (Barad 2007: 339).

Interpreting this considering the above-developed problem of categories would imply that there is no way to derive the category "nature" (as opposed to the category "non-nature"). Although it denies any cut, NM certainly talks and thinks about nature and natural objects. However, the denial of separability and the focus on intra-action results in a difficulty to talk about nature in a *systematically objective* way. Consequently, it declares an era "beyond" or "after" nature (see the introduction to this volume). The "undermining of the idea of stable and predictable material substance" (Coole and Frost 2010: 13) is hindering large-scale predictions about, for example, the development of the climate system or the accuracy of concepts like the Anthropocene. Clark and Yusoff, for example, critique the implicit anthropocentrism of the idea of an Anthropocene by relativizing the used categories: "if human existence is currently impinging upon earth systems and strata, this agency must itself be seen as an expression of planetary properties, processes, potentialities" (Clark and Yusoff 2017: 17). While a critical consideration of categories and causalities is useful, it is NM's problem that it cannot produce large-scale categories and causalities due to its implicit limitations.

Historicity

The inability to derive any large-scale, objective understanding of nature is directly linked to the theme of historicity. Historicity implies that the material relations governing society are changing. As with the natural object, the social object is un(der)defined in NM, which leads to the problem that the category of *society* cannot be established. The latter would imply a mode of abstraction that is crucial for coming to broader spatio-temporal assertions. Historical inquiries into the materiality of society require a form of generalization that allow for distinctions, separations and assertions of basic characteristics. Epochs and epochal changes would be a categorical result of such generalizing abstractions. NM however differs from the "old", Marxist materialism in its denial of generalizing abstractions. It asserts that "no workable version of Marxism can advance a historical metanarrative, aspire to the identification of determining economic laws, valorize an originary, pristine nature, or envisage communism as history's idealized material destiny" (Coole and Frost 2010: 30). While many categories are somewhat

twisted in this quote, it is indeed pivotal for a truly historical materialism to define the character of our relationship to nature, to see how the material reproduction of society is linked to it and if there are law-like regularities in such material economic relations. This results in the derivation of a large-scale categorical system for the understanding of *social totality*. Instead, NM doesn't talk about history in the singular – something it would reject as essentialist – but rather about the "histories" of "all objective entities [that] are products of a historical process, that is, their identity is synthesized or produced as part of cosmological, geological, biological, or social history" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012b: 39). There is hence no (social) category of history linked a particular materiality of society that would provide truly social "synthesis" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012b: 39).

Criticality

I maintain that it is exactly this *synthesis* and the according systematic understanding of contradictions that enables a materialist perspective on society. Only in such a framework can we critically approach it as a historically developing but also stable set of material social relations. We require a discernible historical materiality to engage with it critically if critique means anything but a mere reproduction of the given. The Marxist understanding of *immanent critique* thus evaluates society (but never nature!) by "critical standards" that are "given in the historical process" (Antonio 1981: 332). While these critical standards are immanent, they also imply transcendence, that is, a notion of emancipation. This is usually linked to a notion of ideology that has to do with the incoherence between material reality and normative justifications of this reality. Critical theory thus links historicity and materiality, and indeed points toward a different historical condition that would yield a less ideological and alienating social materiality. NM's lack of historicity and its monist submergence into the "plane of immanence" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 255) forbids this kind of understanding of critique. It rather embraces a sort of "oppositional consciousness" that "combines critique with creativity" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012c: 22). Karen Barad even maintains that she is "not interested in critique" as that the latter is "over-rated, over-emphasized and over-utilized" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012a: 49). Instead, she proposes a "practice of diffraction, of reading diffractively for patterns of differences that make a difference" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012a: 49; see Merten in this volume). NM seeks to be affirmative and constructive – yet not as a result of practical considerations but due to its meta-theoretical hostility toward notions of large-scale historical change and toward the theoretical ramifications brought about by that critical thought with regard to this change: the dualist opposition of the present and the future; the categorical delimitation of the contradictions arising from this opposition; the way this relates to nature and society; and the need for historicity within a critical theory. *Pace* Barad, I maintain that NM's affirmative "oppositional consciousness" is (largely) not serving the end of social change. This end requires a *critical theory* of the momentum of modernity.

Putting materiality in its place: the momentum of modernity and critical theory

I propose to return to variants of historical materialism that offer a critique of the concrete social totality that defines capitalist-patriarchal modernity. A promising candidate for such a critique is Hartmut Rosa's theory of acceleration (ToA). Although not explicitly situated in a historical materialist framework, ToA is fulfilling most if not all requirements of a critical theory. A closer look unveils ToA indebtedness to Marx and the Frankfurt School tradition (Rosa 2013: xviii).

Rosa explicitly sides with critical theory as a *critique of capitalism* (Rosa 2015). I interpret his thematization of time as central axis for a diagnosis of modern materiality as both a topical addition and a clever reframing of critical theory. Others (Postone 1993) have given special attention to time, but ToA has the advantage of integrating normative aspects and thus making critical theory more accessible. ToA however doesn't become normativist in a Habermasian vein; it sticks to empirical sociological diagnoses that are intelligible beyond narrow academic diagnoses, especially in its treatment of acceleration as *social change* and *pace of life*. In terms of the causal foundations of ToA, these two forms of acceleration are building on *technological acceleration*, which again is closely aligned with the "acceleration anchored in the capitalistic economic system" (Rosa 2013: 49). Technological acceleration has its roots in accumulation and the value-based political economy described in Marx's *Capital*. Rosa is a Marxist after all – but he is so in relative disguise, often saying "modernity" when in fact meaning "capitalism". This somewhat oblique character of ToA has been criticized by more outright Marxists (Schulz 2015), but critical diagnoses of capitalism can have different languages. The metatheoretical question is, whether they ultimately end up saying the same thing – and this has to do with the categorical delineation of basic material mechanisms that govern social totality and society-nature relations.

ToA offers a convincing approach to these mechanisms because the category of acceleration is offering a solid account of *historicity*. ToA explicitly deals with the question of periodization and offers articulate diagnoses of recent developments that highlight both *persistent* characteristics (the imperative of growth and acceleration as such) and *change* (the aggravation of the inherent contradictions between "technical" acceleration and the acceleration of the social lifeworld). The momentum of modernity differs from that of all other historical periods as it has a sui generis "logic", which – far from being essentially rooted in any kind of extra-social necessity – is in principle changeable. However, due to the peculiar (temporal) character of the social form of "change" – namely the impetus of accelerative growth governed by the law of value – it is very hard to significantly alter it. All attempts to do so have failed, even the socialist projects of the 20th century didn't overcome this fundamental logic. The recent aggravation of contradictions must be understood as related to the basic (persistent) momentum of capitalist materiality. ToA offers a theory of late modernity that is describing not solely a *crisis* rooted in contingent events but rather a broader historical dynamic that relates to systemic material mechanisms and is convincingly described as a

"disintegration of society" (Rosa 2009: 104) irreversibly linked to "late modernity" (Rosa 2009: 97).

In order to understand the functional and normative aspects of historical disintegration, one must turn to the *critical* features of ToA. A contestation of the momentum of modernity is central for this: acceleration is *autopoietic* and *alienating*. It is exactly the anonymous and machine-like form of acceleration that alienates people as society differentiates itself functionally, socially and culturally. With this thesis in mind, sociological analysis is never neutral but always relates to this value judgment about a distorted relation to the world (*Weltbeziehung*). Again, a strictly Marxist perspective might find other words for this dimension of modern materiality. I have found an expanded concept of *fetishism* fruitful for illustrating those mechanisms that are materially linked to social integration and the foundation for the various ideological distortions that produce falsity in both its substantial and normative meaning (cf. Flatschart 2012, 2014, 2018). Criticizing capitalism not merely for matters of distribution of wealth but for the apersonal yet social characteristics of its production is progressive as it permits a truly immanent form of critique that is *universal* and *impartial* (cf. Henning 2020).

When we look at the normative ramifications of ToA's critique of alienation, the question of *emancipation* or the "other" of the prevalent materiality arises. In his recent work, Rosa develops a notion of *resonance* that contrasts alienated world relations (*Weltbeziehungen*). It is this side of the larger framework of ToA that I'm most critical of. Does the category of resonance go beyond a vague "oppositional consciousness" and license true social change? It has been widely acknowledged that the theorem of resonance hinges upon the communitarian background Rosa shares with Charles Taylor. Abandoning historical materialism, resonance seeks to describe a condition of relations toward the world that produces experiences of "response" and the feeling of having a "voice". Rosa depicts this condition in detail in his colossal book (Rosa 2016). However, this interesting multiplicity implies the serious trade-off of vagueness and idealization. As an *ideal or naturalistic generalization*, it is not depicting mechanisms or structures of any concrete historical materiality and is thus, as others have noted (Brumlik 2016), beyond the scope of critical theory. That doesn't have to be a problem, but a certain subtext of the concept is problematic. It suggests spaces of resonance as something materially located within existing society and implies that resonance is not just a contingent subjective "feeling" or "experience" but is concretely harbored by certain "spheres" abjected by society – among them nature. Resonance then is the Other of acceleration, establishing a new sublime dialectic of immanent contradictions and the potential for emancipation within the current historical materiality.

Such a reading would have to stand against the critique of being ignorant of many decades of feminist (and postcolonial) theorization of the Other. Feminist scholarship beginning with Simone de Beauvoir has clearly shown that the binaries of strong versus tender, cold versus warm, mechanic versus organic, dictating versus responsive and autonomous versus dependent have an intrinsically gendered character. The prevailing materiality is after all not one that is solely

abstract, dominated by the universal principles of capital and acceleration; it is also patriarchal and thus producing an androcentric, gendered symbolic imaginary and a very material division of labor that not only builds upon the – apparently natural – *re-production of experiences of resonance* but also obeys to a very different temporal regime that Frigga Haug called the "logic of time expenditure" (Haug 1996: 143f). While these spaces of care and re-production do exist, they are not innocent and far from "outside the box".

Lastly, returning to the theme of *nature*, I suspect that Rosa incorporates natural materiality far too immediately and uncritically in his dialectic of acceleration and resonance. "In our late modern world, 'nature' has, quite paradoxically, become synonymous with the unattainable, non-available 'other' on the one hand, and with something we are guilty of destroying on the other" (Rosa 2018: 43). Nature, which is by no surprise often romantically linked to an ideologically female imaginary (Guillaumin 1995; Scheich 1994), is perceived as a really existing Other that enables resonance, opposes the cold machine of acceleration and needs to be protected from it. A critique of the somewhat romantic search for such natural spaces of resonance is then, again, well within the scope of critical theory.[2]

Society-nature relations and the energic momentum of modernity

Returning to the Frankfurt School heritage, we find at its fringes the work of Alfred Schmidt and his *theory of society-nature relations* (SNR). Schmidt shows that "the 'materialist' character of Marxist theory does not amount to a confession of the incurable primacy of the economy" but rather highlights the "ghostly internal logic of their own conditions, toward this pseudophysis that makes them commodities and at the same time provides the ideology according to which they are already in control of their own destinies" (Schmidt 1971: 41). Capitalist SNR then must be grasped as a demi-real, negative materiality in which both nature and capitalist second nature are produced as an alienating contradiction. This is much in line with ToA, but SNR explicitly integrates the relation to nature as an immanent feature of social totality. Nature is thus not othered but seen as a *relatum* in a produced, contradictory duality, a *relatum* that is neither innocent nor attainable as such.

Following Marx, Schmidt argued that the negative ontology of SNR is governed by the *automatic subject* of capital, which itself gains its momentum from *abstract labor*. It is the mediation that links the internality of social forms to the externality of substance, second nature to first nature. Abstract labor is the category of totality that ultimately propels acceleration, as it channels the "expenditure of human brains, nerves, and muscles" (Marx 1996: 54) toward the anonymous, universalizing and fetishized system of value-forms. It is this tremendous channeling of human energy toward one goal that is the foundation of all facets of acceleration and alienation – even though aspects of it, such as competition, may seem to be more straightforward candidates for a social critique.

The energetic abstraction pivoting on abstract labor becomes evident in capital. According to Marx, capital, *M-C-M'*, is neither a purely natural nor a social thing; it is neither a quantity nor a quality but a process of coalescing of social and natural materialities. It is the powerful energy that propels and accelerates society. As such, it is a *fetishized energic fix* (cf. Flatschart 2018: 131) that deprives human energy exhaustion of both its autonomy and resonance.

What Marx and maybe also Schmidt couldn't sufficiently account for is that abstract human energy is but one aspect of the energic momentum that fuels acceleration. Historically, a concrete *material fix* was required in order to ignite the machine of capital accumulation. The compression of time and space and with it the accelerative spiral of capital would not have been possible without the fossil energy system. Fossil energy from coal or oil is much more than a natural resource; it is the natural aspect that dovetails with abstract labor and constitutes *energy as a social relation*. The ideal-typical North American abstract worker isn't conceivable without his car. Autonomy is still linked to the high mobility and flexibility of fossil oil and as such deeply inscribed in our culture and everyday life. Energy has long been taken for granted and naturalized. Both the increase in popular consciousness concerning the effects of this system (namely climate crisis) and the recent rise of energy studies (cf. Huber 2009) are starting to change this situation. ToA should pay much closer attention to energy as a social relation mediating the natural and social sides of modern materiality and thus producing *synthesis* for the contradicting trajectories that the accelerative momentum of modernity produces. As I have shown elsewhere (Flatschart 2018), an incorporation of energy in an overarching SNR may also help to provide alternatives to romanticized and gender-blind perspectives on nature.

The crisis of the materiality of energy: a return to critical theory?

Energy provides synthesis in SNR. So far, this has only been possible due to the specific energy that fossil materiality encompassed. The enormous advantage of the fossil energy system however came at a cost – namely *non-renewability* and the temporal and spatial postponement of substantial natural (detrimental) effects. Both lead to a tremendous increase of contradictions produced by the current energy-system. The latter is without doubt in crisis. But in contrast to what many (uncritical) ecologists suggest it is not solely or primarily a matter of natural materiality, for example, scarcity or climate-effects. The crisis of energy as a social relation encompasses social materiality. The most pertinent question is whether we can conceive the modern momentum without fossilism. From the onset, capitalist acceleration was fossilist and would not have been possible without the unique features that fossil energy exhibits. As I have argued in the beginning, our multiple crisis amounts to a post-condition – but one that is both increasingly de-synthesizing and lacking alternatives. Energy relations mediate this condition. Although renewable energy sources are available and used, they are far from producing an alternative *energic materiality*, that is, a new system

mediating synthesis. To return to ToA: it is exactly the abstract, quantitative character of acceleration that produces the apparently insurmountable coupling of fossil energy and capitalist SNR.

The point I want to underline is that it is unlikely that we will get rid of the fossil energy-system if we do not completely alter existing SNR. This implies an abandonment of the accelerative momentum of modernity and thus a noncapitalist materiality. We will not master the challenges imposed by the crisis of the current materiality if we do not think systematically and overcome both acceleration and the existing energetic mediation of SNR. As I've shown in the fivefold problem-complex, NM is incapable of comprehending the system-character of the crisis and thus cannot derive an adequate understanding of it. At large, it is more an ideological product and perpetuator of the crisis than a possible solution. We should return to critical theory and avoid the pitfalls of allegedly immediate accesses to materiality. ToA offers great potential for such a critical theory but it should pay closer attention to SNR and especially to the theme of energy. It must be careful as well not to develop the concept of resonance into a "transversal" concept akin to NM monist materiality.

Notes

1 Whether we talk about dualities (determined, relational oppositions) or dualisms (more developed, potentially ideologically imbued oppositions embedded in a specific system of thought) is a matter of interpretation; NM however doesn't distinguish between both concepts as it attacks the broader notion of oppositional relation itself.
2 NM's vitalism, on the other hand, might be open to align itself with such a view of nature. This might amount to a (problematic) link between Rosa and NM thought that he should be aware of.

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