

New Materialism and Marxism as Critique: ‘Mattering’ Mind vs ‘Minding’ Matter

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David Chandler (University of Westminster) d.chandler@wmin.ac.uk (comments welcomed)

Introduction

If Marx was alive today, I imagine him reworking his famous aphorism on history, from the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, as “Materialist critique always repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” This presentation will argue that the first modern political use of materialist critique - historical materialism - ended in tragedy, while the second, current, wave of materialist critique - new materialism - is farce, but with effects nevertheless.

Both critiques juxtaposition themselves against mechanical materialism. For historical materialism, the standing of Hegel ‘on his head’ enabled a powerful dialectical critique of binary understandings of the idealist Enlightenment subject and the fixed natural order. New materialism similarly focuses on the binary divides of what is seen as the modernist episteme, especially the binaries of subject/object, mind/matter and culture/nature. Practically all of today’s critical materialist perspectives take aim at the Cartesian subject and the Newtonian vision of fixed natural laws.

Historical Materialism	New Materialism
Tragedy	Farce
‘Mattering’ mind	‘Minding’ matter
Human to come	Never been human
Point is to change world	Point is to reinterpret world
Revolution	Adaptation

Historical Materialism

The modernist, Cartesian, Newtonian binaries were critiqued from a particular angle through the Marxist cannon: *the mattering of mind*. The revolutionary position was that the human did not already exist, but was a potential to come: that mind did not have a passive relationship to matter, but was a product of matter, of circumstances. Mind was a product of history and environment; thoughts and concepts depend on the level of both material and social development (see, for example, the work of famous Bolshevik psychologists, Luria and Vygotsky) and needed to be free from the constraints of capitalist social relations. Capitalism constrained the development of mind not just

through holding back the development of science and productive forces but also through the mystifications of commodity fetishism, described in *Capital* Vol. 1, where it appeared that markets/prices 'naturally' controlled labour/employment rather than these being the product of social relations. Similarly, Marxists critiqued the appearance of bourgeois freedoms and equality to argue that profits were a product of structural exploitation in the hidden sphere of production.

For Marxists, it was necessary therefore to change matter to liberate mind. Revolution was necessary to bring the human into being. "Philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it." The problem of course was that a paradox emerged, minds had to be changed in order to change matter in order to change minds. The separation of mind and matter was reproduced and brought to the forefront in the struggle to build a revolutionary political movement. The tragedy of this first materialist critique was to end with Lenin's vanguard politics (a failed attempt to force revolution in order to change minds) and the reaction to this failure in the shift away from materialist critique, seen in Gramsci's retreat into discourse in the *Prison Notebooks* and later the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis on the post-Marxist Left, breaking with the idea of any fixed material foundations.

New Materialism

Interestingly, new materialist theorists rarely engage with the experience and failure of historical materialism, they generally tend to directly counter position themselves to mechanical materialism. This flags up the complete loss of the Marxist tradition of materialist critique and is unfortunate for it could have alerted theorists to the problems of critique reproducing the division of mind and matter that proved so paradoxical for the first wave of revolutionary critique.

Instead of 'mattering mind', new materialists attack mechanical materialism from the opposite direction: *the minding of matter*. Rather than the Marxist position of the human to come, for new materialists, 'We Have Never Been Human' (to paraphrase the title of Latour's famous work). Because the angle of critique is the mirror-opposite I think it's a mistake to link new materialism to Marxism via the detour of post-Marxism and Deleuze.

The genealogy of new materialism, I think can be found in approaches to politics that bypass mind, rather than seek to develop it. New materialist approaches, with a diminished view of the human subject, focus on adapting to matter, through recognising its liveliness, its patterns and interplays. Matter can be 'minded' in a number of ways, which can be heuristically derived from a study of the development of cybernetics (Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman*, is still the stand out work in this area).

At least three positions can be isolated, and presented historico-logically (see Rubin on method, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*) as developing away from subject- towards object-orientated positions. Firstly, that of the homeostatic

subject, usually associated with post-World War II cybernetics, focused on feedback and the maintenance of equilibrium: it is the interactive relationship with the environment that is key not the subject acting on the object only (see Latour's *Facing Gaia*). Secondly, the development of this interactive framing to the autopoietic subject, which develops through its interaction, with the environment merely triggering internal relational processes of change; the basis of assemblage theory, new institutional approaches to differentiation etc (see DeLanda's *New Philosophy*). Thirdly, a much flatter theory of complexity, associated with virtual life computer analytics, where all life can be seen to be interacting in emergent ways (order emerging at the edge of chaos through simple interactions), this develops and moves beyond the still subject-centred framing of autopoiesis (for example, Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* or approaches more akin to a Deleuzian framing of a pure plane of immanence).

New materialist theorists (particularly in the fields of social science and the humanities) are often not concerned with necessarily drawing out any distinctions between these framings but rather with the critical openings achieved on the basis of 'minding matter', perceived as in itself adequate to challenge modernist perspectives, held to assume strict binary divisions. This is why discussion often revolves around a host of 'new materialisms' (Coole and Frost's *New Materialisms*) rather than attempting to find conceptual clarity.

New materialism(s) seems peculiarly uninterested in conceptual clarity (associated with the 'polemics' of traditional critique). New materialism as political critique seeks to challenge and disrupt accepted approaches rather than articulate programmes of change. Whereas historical materialism sought to paradoxically change mind (through political engagement) to change matter (through revolution) to change mind (to free human potential), new materialism reproduces this mind/matter duality in a mirror-positioning. New materialism seeks to use matter (appearances, ecological crisis) to change mind (approach to science, politics, economics, ecology) to change matter (to avert global warming, ecological disruption). Whereas, for Marxists, the problem was not interpreting the world but changing it, for new materialists the problem is the need to interpret the world differently, to be more respectful of it and less 'hubristic' and carry out a duty of care, rather than focus on appropriation, extraction, ownership, direction and control.

Through 'minding matter' they seek to provide means and techniques for new, more iterative and experimental forms of governance. Here critique runs into the paradox that rather than the revolutionary vanguard party it is nature itself that should dictate new forms of governing. 'Minding matter' does not easily translate into a politics of critique without a subject. Matter does not and cannot directly 'speak' to us, although that is what we are told to imagine, when we see heavy rain, melting icecaps, dancing penguins, global warming, technological disasters or computer network cascades of failure (or dead rats and litter, see Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*).

Beyond Materialism as Critique

'Minding matter' to change mind does not work well as political critique because of the problems of access, and inevitable drift into either mysticism 'hearing the voices of nature' or of paranoia 'we caused global warming, floods, earthquakes, etc'. This is why the speculative realists or object-orientated ontologists find appeal in their critique of this position as 'correlationist' (see Meillassoux's *After Finitude* etc). Political critique necessarily implies a modernist cut between subject/object, mind/matter and culture/nature, which always co-constitutes them. Speculative realism puts matter out of reach of the subject, stressing the necessity of contingency, taking further the logic of the new materialist approach to go beyond the mind/matter problematic and materialism as political critique.

While the first iteration of materialist critique ended in the tragedy of revolutionary defeat and its legacies, the second wave of materialist critique could be seen as a coming to terms with this defeat: materialist critique as farce. Critique as 'critique of critique' in a period of demoralisation and of a coming to terms with the world as it is. Critique as a call for 'adaptation' rather than 'revolution'.

New materialism, the 'minding of matter', works well as a reflection of contemporary sensibilities and of the scaling-back of aspirations of transformation. But it lacks intellectual coherence when it is posed as a form of political critique, degrading into a fairly naïve green liberal idealism. Nevertheless, the legacy of new materialism in object orientated philosophy seems assured and also in forming the backdrop to the development of everyday micro-politics or life-politics: as a new creative form of interactive pragmatic problem-solving - of 'life-hacking' - working with life processes rather than against them (Invisible Committee, McKenzie Wark's *Hackers Manifesto*). In a world of complex interaction and flatter causal processes: all that can be done is to work *with* things, repurposing relations, re-envisioning contexts. New materialism wins in the end because reinterpreting the world has now become *the* process of changing it. Farce is only farce when it presents itself as a dramatic struggle against current circumstances; as a welcoming of the world as it is, new materialism instead becomes the anodyne and everyday process of coping and survival.