

Marxism and the New Materialism

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ABSTRACT: Materialism, the idea that nature's entities are manifestations of single protean thing and that there are thus no supernatural properties of life or mind, has come in and out of fashion in philosophy, but has always been a tenet of Marxism. A recent philosophical initiative, New Materialism, substitutes a "flat ontology" for the Marxist dialectics of nature, simultaneously denying the specificity of living systems and devaluing human agency. A typical stratagem of these philosophers is to separate their initiative from Marxism by misrepresenting the latter.

KEYWORDS: Louis Althusser, Frederick Engels, Vladimir Lenin, evolution, development, transhumanism.

MATERIALISM IS A PHILOSOPHICAL CONVICTION that everything that exists is one or another manifestation of a single thing, matter. If a philosopher holds that life, or mind, are intrinsically different from nonliving, or insentient, matter, then they are a dualist, a pluralist, or a vitalist since they posit something in addition to matter. Some philosophers, in contrast, are idealists, contending that what appears as matter is just expressions of mind or spirit. Marxism, a philosophy that emerged from the German idealist tradition, committed itself unequivocally to materialism. But since it also postulated that matter exists in a multiplicity of forms, it employed "dialectical" stratagems adopted from the idealist Hegel, such as the transformation of quantity into quality, but in the material realm.

After a century and a half of disrepute in mainstream philosophies that favored structuralist and linguistic approaches to comprehending reality, materialism is making a comeback, although some would argue that Marxism never went away. As signaled by its appellations, the philosophical

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tendency known variously as “the materialist turn” or the “New Materialism” takes seriously the primacy of matter in comprehending the world. But what precisely is matter?

The Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, writing in France in the politically tumultuous period of early 1968, found it important to revisit Vladimir Lenin’s understanding of the concept in an essay the latter wrote 60 years earlier, when materialist philosophy seemed to be challenged by the ideas of the physicist Ernst Mach, particularly as espoused by Lenin’s Bolshevik rival, the physician and philosopher Alexander Bogdanov. The controversies have faded in relevance—Mach’s challenge to the Newtonian absolutes of space and time prefigured Einstein’s relativity theory—but Lenin’s insights into the nature of matter are still pertinent. In Althusser’s description:

[. . .] the philosophical *category* of matter, which is conjointly a thesis of existence and a thesis of *objectivity*, can never be confused with the contents of the scientific *concepts* of matter. The scientific concepts of matter define knowledges, relative to the historical state of the sciences, about the objects of those sciences. The content of the scientific concept of matter changes with the development, i.e., with the deepening of scientific knowledge. The meaning of the philosophical category of matter does not change, since it does not apply to any object of science, but affirms the *objectivity* of all scientific knowledge of an object. The category of *matter* cannot change. It is ‘absolute’ [. . .] The consequences which Lenin draws from this distinction are crucial. Firstly, he re-establishes the truth about what was then called the ‘crisis of physics’ [i.e., that portended by the work of Max Planck and Albert Einstein]: physics is not in crisis, but in growth. Matter has not ‘disappeared’. The scientific concept of matter alone has *changed in content*, and it will always go on changing in the future, for the process of knowledge is infinite in its object itself. (Althusser 1971, 49 [written 1968]).

In Lenin’s own words from the work in question, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism. Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*, “[. . .] the only ‘property’ of matter to whose acknowledgment philosophical materialism is bound is the property of being objective reality, outside of our consciousness” (Lenin 1970, 260).

Notwithstanding the protean and indeed revolutionary notion of matter embedded in Marxist thought, the New Materialism is associated with a rejection of dialectical and historical materialism, Marxism’s philosophies of nature and social evolution. Jane Bennett, in the influential *Vibrant Matter* (2010), discusses Karl Marx only in her preface, asking:

How did Marx’s notion of materiality—as economic structures and exchanges that provoke many other events—come to stand for the materialist perspective per se? Why is there not a more robust debate between contending philosophies of materiality or between contending accounts of how materiality matters to politics? (p. xvi)

Not mentioned in the book is Frederick Engels (1872, 82), Marx’s close collaborator and author of *Dialectics of Nature*, responsible for such passages as:

[. . .] the existence of such and such a number of physical forces was abolished from science by the proof of their inter-connections and transitions. Physics, like astronomy before it, had arrived at a result that necessarily pointed to the eternal cycle of matter in motion as the ultimate conclusion [. . .] The preparation by inorganic means of compounds that hitherto had been produced only in the living organism proved that the laws of chemistry have the same validity for organic as for inorganic bodies, and to a large extent bridged the gulf between inorganic and organic nature, a gulf that even Kant regarded as forever impassable. (Engels 1988, 326)

Manuel DeLanda, another new materialist, stated in a 2012 interview that:

The only good thing that Marxism ever gave us was its materialism, the idea that we need to explain things that happen right here without appeals to God, without appeals to Platonic essences, without appeals to anything transcendental. Of course, Marxists, to the extent that they bought Hegelian dialectics, were never really true materialists since dialectic is not at all something of this world. (DeLanda 2012)

And Bruno Latour, an eminence grise of the movement, similarly exhibits his lack of sympathy (and understanding) of the philosophical corpus by asserting that ‘capitalism does not exist’ (Latour 1988, 173; cited in Choat 2018) and asking, “when we speak of the misdeeds of capitalism, don’t we have to turn toward sorcery in order to understand the black magic that leaves us helpless in the face of its abuses?” (Latour 2013, 426).

The philosopher Simon Choat, in a 2018 essay, suggests that according to the new materialists Marxists are guilty of either adopting a view of science as a social product, ideologically laden as any other, with only class analysis having any claim to truth, or instrumentally, as an element of the productive forces employed as weapons in class conflict. While support for these caricatures can be gleaned from the writings of some Marxists, consultation of any of the Marxist sources mentioned above, and many others (e.g., Levins and Lewontin 1985; Harvey 1996; Foster 2020) shows it not

to represent the strength of the tradition. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the misrepresentation flows from an anti-left bias among these thinkers.

An illuminating case in point is provided by the discussion by Choat of Bennett's treatment in *Vibrant Matter* of the widespread North American power blackout that occurred in August 2003. Bennett attributed the grid failure to an assemblage of different "actants" (Latour's term for causal agents; see below): it involved consumers, energy companies and regulators, but also buildings, computers, coal, electrons and so on, with dispersed agency and no simple cause. Choat (2018, 1030) characterizes Bennett view as, "[W]e may have an impulse to blame rapacious corporations, lax regulators or industry deregulation and privatization, but we cannot reasonably do so when so many agents were involved." Bennett herself acknowledges that this argument echoes the assertion of the FirstEnergy corporation, grid's the owner and operator, that 'no one really is to blame.'

Contrast this with Althusser's concept of "determination in the last instance" to understand how deeply complex systems (such as social formations) can have causal structures that exhibit primary determinants (often reflective of their histories) and are thus not simply aggregates of interacting factors. In his essay "Contradiction and Overdetermination" he addresses the sometimes mechanically applied Marxist notion of determination of the "superstructure" (politics, culture, and so on) by the "economic base":

[. . .] the economy determines for the non-economic elements their respective degrees of autonomy/dependence in relation to itself and to one another, thus their differential degrees of specific effectivity. It can determine itself as dominant or not-dominant at any particular time, and in the latter case it determines which of the elements is to be dominant. (Althusser 1969, 255)

It might be an overwhelming task for a politically indifferent new materialist to attribute decisive causality to any of the inextricable actants in the 2003 power failure. A Marxist analysis of the social management of technology, however, would have no trouble identifying the callous logic of the profit system as the event's last-analysis determinant, as others on both the right and left recognized an obdurate centralized bureaucracy as the dominating factor of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

It is in its handling of the concepts of ontology and agency, however, that the limitations, and indeed unscientific character of the new materialist program, are revealed. Ontology, the philosophical discourse about

what exists, and what the relationships are among existent entities, is inherently time-dependent: historical, developmental and evolutionary. Since there is continuity between different forms of matter, no object is eternal and unsusceptible to change. But objects, however transitory they are in the grand scheme of things, still have inherent properties, predictable behaviors, “laws of motion.” Earlier in the history of the universe, for instance, temperatures were too high for atoms to exist, and smaller particles prevailed. As regions of the universe cooled, small and eventually larger atoms formed. But there was a limit: fewer than 100 discrete elements exist in nature, each with unique chemical properties. They are examples of what philosophers refer to as “natural kinds.”

Historical materialism, Marx’s theory of social formations, identifies feudalism and capitalism as such distinct entities, with their own organization principles and temporal developmental relationships to each other, and with the potential (though not the inevitability) of evolving into novel forms: socialism and communism. The analogy to chemical evolution is far from straightforward—societies are more complex and overdetermined than atoms. But there is a parallel in the possibility of abrupt reorganization of component parts, engendering new modes that operate according to new principles.

Charles Darwin, in his theory of evolution by natural selection, sought to abolish the notion of natural kinds from the world of living organisms, claiming that every species among the animals, plants, fungi, etc. were generated by a series of gradual steps from ancestral and intermediate forms. The implication was that there were no true jumps between types (just apparent ones) or qualitatively different organizational principles, that separate one kind of living being from another. As liberating as it was from the Biblical metaphysics of special creation, Darwinian gradualism is increasingly challenged in modern evolutionary theory. This has occurred through the concept of punctuated equilibrium of Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould (1997) which attributes authenticity to the discontinuities of the fossil record, and in contemporary evolutionary developmental biology—“EvoDevo”—which has identified genetic and physical/material determinants that distinguish different forms of life from one another. It can no longer be sustained that *natura non facit saltus* in organic evolution (Müller 2021).

The mid-twentieth century philosopher Karl Popper also resisted attribution of natural kind-ness, branding “essentialism,” the focus on intrinsic properties of objects and other entities, as an intellectual blind alley. While

not denying that something could have such properties, he thought it was unproductive to dwell on them rather than how its descriptor is used in a theoretical system. He thus called himself a “methodological nominalist” (Popper 1968).

It is clear from examples like the chemical elements that anti-essentialism cannot serve as a consistent scientific program. Popper’s main use of it was as a rhetorical cudgel wielded against thinkers he opposed, most prominently Plato, Hegel and Marx. But it’s equally clear that essentialism can itself be an ideological weapon. The new materialist Karen Barad, in her 2003 paper “Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter,” cites the social theorist Judith Butler on her notion of “gender performativity,” where Butler proposes that gender should be understood (in Barad’s words) “not as a thing or a set of free-floating attributes, not as an essence—but rather as a ‘doing’.” According to Butler, “gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity [. . .] gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort” (Barad 2003, 808).

The salutary deconstruction of gender essentialism (an element of oppression that forces a biological continuum into a binary) was a signature move for the new materialists that they converted into an inflexible doctrine. While most are not ready to deny reality to the world’s objects, most claim that nothing is more basic than, can be reduced to, or even explained by, anything else. There are no hierarchies, historically constituted or otherwise. DeLanda call this a “flat ontology” and it is clear how it supports his anti-Marxism. No one should imagine, for instance, that the means of production have any privileged role in social organization or the fashioning of hegemonic ideologies: societies are just (following the more general usage of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze) “assemblages” of such factors, i.e., things of interest interacting with each other (DeLanda 2019). His book on “philosophical chemistry,” for example, makes no mention of the elements having evolved over time from preexisting fundamental particles (DeLanda 2015).

While DeLanda’s earlier book *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (DeLanda 1997) presented an unexceptionable survey of scientific developments in complexity theory and concepts of self-organization, phase transitions, dynamical attractors, solitons, and the generation of emergent novelties, its Deleuzian perspective sought to erase the ontological distinc-

tions between the living and nonliving. In DeLanda's world (Latour, Bennett, and Barad seem similarly unconcerned with the specifics of the history, development and evolution of the world's material objects), not only is ontology flattened, but so is science itself.

Marx's philosophy, having emerged from the German philosophical anthropology school, was focused on the human, and was devoted to "normatively reconstructing the self-formative dynamics of the species" (Moss 2006). But this was just an entry point into a scientific approach to complex systems in general. Particularly in the hand of Engels in *Anti-Dühring* (1988 [1877]) and in the posthumous *Dialectics of Nature*, the applicability of this method to all material systems, and the notion of matter itself as changeable and dynamical became evident. Here is Choat, however, describing what the new materialists believe they have discovered:

The Western philosophical tradition has tended to treat matter as something that is brute and inert: a passive substance to be mastered and manipulated by active human subjects. In this view, if matter acts upon us at all, then it is only as a recalcitrant context that constrains our freedom. In contrast to this lifeless matter, new materialists posit what Bennett (2010) calls a vibrant materiality: the non-human world of things is itself creative and constitutive, producing effects and forming connections. Even apparently stable, inorganic entities such as metal are mobile and active. Matter does not need humans to shape or command it because all matter has generative properties of its own (DeLanda 2012, 43). (Choat 2018, 1030)

And here is Engels in *Dialectics of Nature*:

Motion in the most general sense, conceived as the mode of existence, the inherent attribute, of matter, comprehends all changes and processes occurring in the universe, from mere change of place right up to thinking [. . .] The whole of nature accessible to us forms a system, an interconnected totality of bodies, and by bodies we understand here all material existences extending from stars to atoms, indeed right to ether particles, in so far as one grants the existence of the last named. In the fact that these bodies are interconnected is already included that they react on one another, and it is precisely this mutual reaction that constitutes motion. It already becomes evident here that matter is unthinkable without motion. And if, in addition, matter confronts us as something given, equally uncreatable as indestructible, it follows that motion also is as uncreatable as indestructible. It became impossible to reject this conclusion as soon as it was recognised that the universe is a system, an inter-connection of bodies. (Engels 1872, 362–63)

Engels proceeds for another 200-plus pages to discuss thermodynamics, electricity and magnetism, the emergence of life from matter, the evolution

of humans, all with reference to the history of ideas on matter, idealism, and so forth. Taken along with Lenin's engagement with new developments in physics during his days as a revolutionary (discussed above) and the flourishing of critical ideas on the nature of matter, both nonliving and living, in the early days of the Soviet Union (e.g., the philosopher Boris Hessen's discussion of Newton's having failed to discern the concept of energy implicit in his laws of motion due to thermodynamics being unknown in his lifetime, and the physiologist Boris Zavadovsky's consideration of "The 'Physical' and 'Biological' in the Process of Organic Evolution",¹ both in the collection *Science at the Cross Roads* (1931), edited by the Marxist philosopher Nicolai Bukharin), the existence of this tradition shows conclusively that the repeated attempts to place Marxism in the "inert, passive matter" camp of Western thought is a slander, likely a politically motivated one.

The "democracy of objects" (Bryant 2011) implied by DeLanda's flat ontology reaches its apogee in the decentering and devaluation of the human evinced in New Materialism's treatment of agency. These philosophers assimilate the concept, and often the term itself, to Latour's notion of 'actant,' defined as something (i.e., everything)—an animal, plant, mineral, or chemical—that acts, makes things happen or produces effects. Choat (2018) quotes Bennett as asserting "that agency itself is located in the complex interinvolvement of humans and multiple nonhuman actants" (Bennett 2015), and Barad as using 'intra-action' to signify "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (Barad 2007, 33).

These formulations erase or demote the specificity of life and its living matter. According to the philosopher Lenny Moss, "Any entity that actively defines and regulates its own boundaries and sustains its integrity according to a set of internal motives and rules, can be regarded as possessing agency" (personal communication). This clearly only applies to life, including all living cells, and their derivatives, such as multicellular organisms and artifacts such as automata and robots, which are entirely dependent on the prior existence and ingenuity of humans. An individual life form

1. "[. . .] biological phenomena, historically connected with physical phenomena in inorganic nature, are none the less not only not reducible to physico-chemical or mechanical laws, but within their own limits as biological processes display varied and qualitatively distinct laws. Thereby biological laws do not in the least lose their material quality and cognisability, requiring only in each case methods of research appropriate to the phenomena studied" (Zavadovsky 1931, 76).

can contain multiple agents, as with humans and their enteric flora constituting ‘holobionts,’ but to democratize an ecological assemblage to the extent of putting the living and nonliving actants on par is inimical to a scientifically sound approach. For example, understanding the development of multicellular structures in the life cycles of microbes for which such stages are optional can partly be accounted for by active-matter physics, but there is an irreducible agential aspect that currently defies explanation (Angel et al. 2020). Agency and autonomy of living systems, how they originated and what their relationship is to other forms of matter, is an area of active investigation in the philosophy of biology that would suffer from the infusion of a metaphysics that leveled the distinctions between life and nonlife (Moreno & Mossio 2015).

To conclude, philosophy took a turn toward an active-matter ontology when Marx and Engels committed themselves to conceptualizing a world independent of supernatural design and purpose. This world (according to their theory) eventually engendered living organisms capable of organizing their own existence. In the words of the twentieth–twenty-first century Marxist evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin, these entities were both the “subjects and objects of evolution” (Lewontin 1983).

The original terrain of investigation for Marx and Engels was the constitution of human nature, a problematic inherited from philosophical anthropology. To address this question, they conceptualized a new scientific object, the social formation, a complex historical entity with developmental propensities determined, in the last analysis, by the means of production of basic and socially conditioned needs and the struggle between group—social classes—with different and unequal relationships to these productive forces and resources. This was the theory of historical materialism.

This kind of analysis was premature for the rest of nature, the physical and material sciences not having developed sufficiently far. But Engels did his best to frame such an approach in *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature*, complementing the century-old science of mechanics, a theory of static and inertial matter, with the recently devised and emerging theories of thermodynamics, chemistry, atoms and molecules, electricity and magnetism, the living cell, and evolutionary theory. Matter, according to Engels, was continuous throughout the universe but took different forms under different conditions as changes in quantitative balance of complex assemblages yielded new qualities. This was the framework of dialectical materialism, the Marxist program never being only about social change.

In the twentieth and then twenty-first century science found itself concerned with multidimensional dynamical systems, oscillatory and self-organizing phenomena, quantum mechanics, special and general relativity, quarks and strings, primary and secondary phase transitions, glassy and other amorphous states, deterministic chaos, and other previously unrecognized forms of matter. Additional exotic states of matter, pertaining to cell differentiation and embryonic morphogenesis, have even been detected in biology, (Newman 2019; 2020). These efforts have lost all overt connection to a political philosophy, but the persistent questions of what the relationship is among these forms of matter, the limits of inter-level reductionism, that is, the transformation of quantity into quality, trace their intellectual origins to nothing other than the dialectical materialism of Engels and Marx.

The new materialists are inheritors of this Marxist legacy, but they are either oblivious to it or deny it on thin grounds. What several explicitly reject, for reasons best known to themselves, is the original embodiment of the philosophy in the form of historical materialism, a theory which they disingenuously conflate with the entire Marxist program. This theory postulates that societies, including their own, have inherent instabilities and developmental propensities, for good or ill, related to how human subjects mobilize and disturb natural forces. This is now entirely uncontroversial.

With their attempted erasure of Marxism, the new materialists are inevitably taking political sides, promoting quietism on one hand, but on the other valorizing the spontaneity of the market in capitalist economies. These systems are fertile ground for such New Materialism-friendly enterprises as Transhumanism, which is striving to create “better people” by endowing the assemblages it identifies with natural humans with additional, beneficial actants (Rikowski 2003; Newman 2010). However, as stated by the philosopher Glenn Rikowski, “Post/transhuman theorists who terrorise today’s humanity with prognoses of genetically designed bodies, microchips in the brain and the rest typically lack an explanatory dynamic which underpins such developments and projections” (Rikowski 2003, 140).

Humans have unquestionably wreaked destruction on the planet in the past and continue to in the present. Their ability to do so has been enabled by varieties of anthropocentrism that have denied the agency of nonhuman organisms and, often as not, categories of humans. These ideologies have gone hand-in-glove with economic systems with clear beneficiaries and victims, whose fates have depended on their roles in the respective social

structures. Against this, the new materialist philosophers seem to suggest that their flattened pan-agentialism will address (insofar as they discuss them) the ongoing disasters of climate, war, and inequalities of wealth and personal autonomy in a way disconnected from the perennial class divisions problematized by historical materialism, and the understanding of the development of human consciousness for which dialectical science is an ongoing project.

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