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## New Material Feminisms and Historical Materialism

### *A Diffractive Reading of Two (Ostensibly) Unrelated Perspectives*

HANNA MEIßNER

A specific interest in materiality is the focus of many recent debates in feminist theory. Glossed as "material turn" (Alaimo & Heckman 2008) or "new materialism" (Coole & Frost 2010), the founding move of these debates is a "turn" away from tendencies of social determinism seen as inherent to constructionist perspectives. The focus on social structures, discourse, culture, and human agency as explanatory factors for the specific formation of our historical reality is criticized for its lack of attentiveness to the agency and historicity of the material. As a sociologist with a background in feminist engagements with the historical materialism of Karl Marx, I am very interested in these debates on materiality. The attention to the agentic dynamism of matter, and the critical reflection that the becoming of the world is not exclusively an effect of cultural inscriptions or human activity, represent important challenges to the notion of emancipation as it is implied in the traditions of historical materialism.

I am intrigued, however, by the apparent lack of communication between the recent debates about *new material* feminism and the traditions of *materialist* (Marxist) feminism. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman even state that it is important to distinguish "material feminism" from (Marxist) "materialist feminism" (Alaimo & Hekman 2008: 18). A discussion of the possible reasons and implications of such gestures of distinction would go beyond the scope of this chapter; my argument here focuses on the assumption that there is much to be learned from an engagement that tries to put these perspectives in touch with each other.<sup>1</sup> Framing this assumption in terms of considering two "perspectives" obviously implies problematic simplifications. First of all, there is

no unitary perspective of feminist engagements with Marx (Hennessy & Ingraham 1997), and whether, or in which sense, different authors can be subsumed under the label of new materialism or new material feminism is still being negotiated and established (Hird 2009; van der Tuin 2011; Coole 3013). However, since my objective is to tease out some general questions I have when I find myself emphatically agreeing with important issues raised by historical materialism on the one hand and new feminist materialism on the other hand, it seems helpful to resort to a manageable simplification of confronting two perspectives. Specifically, I am interested in confronting new materialism's critique of the anthropocentric notion of agency as a human privilege and the social ontology of historical materialism that is committed to emancipatory human subjectivity.

### Keeping Oppositions in Tension

Karen Barad's work offers an interesting approach to this confrontation by allowing me to stage it as a *diffractive* confrontation. The metaphor of diffraction, as it was proposed by Donna Haraway and elaborated by Barad, supplies an image for what could happen if we engage with these perspectives in a way that lets them "interrupt each other productively" (Haraway in Schneider 2005: 149). This implies a generosity in the reading of different perspectives; it is not a critique that dismisses one theory from the standpoint of another, it is not "a practice of negativity that [...] is about subtraction, distancing and othering" (Barad in Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012: 49). It is a respectful engagement attempting to carefully read the questions being asked and the arguments being made while at the same time being attentive to their (necessary) presuppositions and limitations as well as to their possibly universalizing presumptions.

Theories, in this sense, are not perceived as representations of a somehow pre-existent reality (and may thus be judged as correct or incorrect, complete or incomplete), but as "sighting devices" (Haraway 2004: 64), as conceptual apparatuses that let us experience reality in a particular way. Theories are thus neither more or less innocent mappings of reality nor are they simply different, equally adequate, stories. In this sense, the point is not to expose the blind spots of a theory and to offer a more complete

account. The point, rather, is to make a theory accountable for its specific visualizations by recognizing and responding to the fact that "bringing something into view depends on the active displacement and marginalization of other things to which they are connected" (Castree 1996: 49).

Barad, engaging with Niels Bohr's philosophy-physics, discusses the intricate epistem-onto-logical implications of such a perception of theory as sighting device. By restaging the notion of the referent as a phenomenon, Barad can claim that theories (or concepts) are neither purely cultural artifacts that impose meaning, nor simply reflections of an observer-independent reality. Phenomena, in Barad's understanding, are not constituted by relations of preexisting entities but are constitutive of particular entities in their relations. This concept of phenomena as "primary ontological units" (Barad 2007: 140) not only blurs the separability of referent and concept, it also implies that agency cannot be attributed to single entities or substances; the dynamics of the constitution of phenomena are not conceived in terms of an interaction of different agents, they are processes of intra-acting agencies (Barad 1995: 59). This ontological claim that the world is not made up of individual things underlies Barad's discussion of the principle of complementarity, which Bohr proposed in opposition to Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Heisenberg points out that it is impossible to simultaneously determine momentum and position of a particle, thus posing the question of the fidelity of measurements as an epistemological problem (we cannot know both position and momentum simultaneously). In Barad's interpretation, Bohr, on the other hand, argues that what is at stake is an ontological problem: particles do not have determinate properties like momentum and position. The position of a particle is a phenomenon that is constituted as such (as a property of a particle) in a specific measurement apparatus; the determination of a particular property (position) is an intra-active achievement, which, at the same time, implies the exclusion of the constitution of other properties (momentum). Barad underlines the element of contextuality and partiality implied in this thinking, stating that "[r]eaders familiar with contemporary feminist theories will recognize Bohr's 'phenomenon' as a sign of the impossibility of a fixed, acontextual, simplistic, or final resolution" (1995: 58). There are always other possible phenomena that can be achieved through other apparatuses.

This concept of complementarity puts an interesting spin on the strategy of a diffractive confrontation of different theories as well as on the notion of generosity involved in this confrontation. A generous engagement with theories does not imply magnanimous gestures of inclusion; rather, it is a gesture of humility, of responding to the fact that theories necessarily produce exclusions when visualizing particular realities and are thus to be made accountable for their effects of displacement and marginalization. Reading different theories diffractively can contribute to such accountability by disrupting any possible aspiration for comprehensiveness or universal generalizability. This reading, then, does not aim for comprehensive closure with different perspectives complementing each other like pieces of a puzzle. Instead, an interesting opening lies in the possibility that different, even contradictory, points of view can be considered as equally possible—or perhaps equally necessary in terms of a project of emancipation.

In the following, I explore the prospects of working with the two material/ist “perspectives” in terms of different (theoretical) apparatuses measuring different phenomena, visualizing different, even oppositional, realities. Whilst new material feminism focuses on the processes of becoming and the potentiality of their openness, historical materialism takes into account specific socially constituted limits that configure the possibilities of becoming. Rather than concluding that a confrontation of these oppositional perspectives calls for decisions, for resolution, I will argue that it is more promising to be attentive to the “points of heresy,” to “paradoxical though it may sound, [...] hold two contradictory discourses simultaneously” (Balibar in Duvoux/Sévérac 2012: 2).

### The Elusive Quality of Matter

Starting from the (cursory) observation that the term *materiality* refers to conditioned possibilities in historical materialism and to unconditioned potentiality in new materialism, I want to argue that this “structured opposition” (Balibar in Duvoux/Sévérac 2012: 2) points to a specific episteme, to a “common discursive space [...] formed as a result of generative conflicts” (ibid.: 3). Inhabiting such a common space, which is “founded on the unity of opposites” (2), both perspectives attempt to hold the tension of this unity (of opposites such as meaning

and matter, form and content, active and passive, etc.), resisting the impulse to resolve it by choosing one of the two possibilities—and yet slipping in this attempt. This slippage, constituting the points of heresy, is probably unavoidable, due to a particular commitment of visualization; the question I want to raise in the following, however, is how to resist reaffirming a particular unity by contextualizing this commitment in a specific epistemic economy.

Historical materialism is rooted in the political commitment of making “visible” that human activity is a positive force in the constitution of reality. Marx’s social theory is a project of critique that applies the “visualizing ‘power’ of theory” (Castree 1996: 48) in order to make conceivable that certain structures of our historical reality are effects of human practices and can thus be transformed by cooperative human agency. The specifically materialist momentum of Marx’s social ontology lies in the fact that he locates the key to transformational human agency not in individual motives or capacities, but in the social conditions that produce and enable individual motives and capacities. This qualification of historical materialism as “*emancipatory critical knowledge*” (Hennessy & Ingraham 1997: 4) is the base of its general appeal for feminists who, in their commitment to a politics of social transformation, see a necessity for theorizing the intersections of social inequalities of gender (and race) with the structures of the mode of production. As Momin Rahman and Anne Witz point out, however, there is a certain slippage in the meaning of the term “material”; the qualification of a materialist analysis as one concerned with systemic structures and power relations begs the question, “[w]hat, precisely, is the ‘materiality’ of the material?” (Witz & Rahman 2003: 251). Witz and Rahman go on, not unreasonably, to wonder “whether, in such deployments, the material is simply being substituted for the social” (252).

New materialism, on the other hand, is explicitly critical of tendencies of social determinism. The focus on the formative dimension of the social is perceived as a *retreat from materiality*, as a lack of attentiveness to the agency and historicity of the material. Mira Hird draws a distinction between new material feminism and historical materialism on the basis of the latter’s inattention to “affective physicality of human-nonhuman encounters and relations. What distinguishes emerging analyses of material feminism [...] is a keen interest in engagements with

matter” (Hird 2009: 329f.). Again, however, echoing the question posed by Witz and Rahman, we have to ask what the term “matter” refers to in this context. And who engages with this matter? On whose terms? In Hird’s text, as in many other contributions to these debates, there is an interesting slippage from a general proclamation of an engagement with *matter* to a specification of an engagement of feminist theory or of humanities/social sciences with *science and technology*. The material appears as metonymy for diverse objects of science and technology: genes, electrons, bodies, hurricanes, earthquakes, and technical artifacts.

These parallel slippages can be seen as symptomatic for debates situated within a particular textual economy, operating with fundamental binaries, like meaning/matter, form/content, and culture/nature. Both perspectives grapple with these dichotomies; both share the assumption that it is impossible to regard the two terms as separate ontological entities. Both, however, resolve the tension by focusing on one of the two terms. Historical materialism, in its insistence on material conditions as the formative powers of reality, is committed to visualizing these conditions as social relations constituting specific forms of human practices that *transform* the material world. As can be shown in Marx’s discussion of the commodity (as a specific historical form of human products), this form does not exist apart from its particular substance. Marx defines the commodity as a unity of two things—of use value and exchange value. Nevertheless, there is an attribution of activity (form/exchange-value) and passivity (substance/use-value); although the formative activity cannot go beyond the given possibilities of the substance, it is the form-giving power. New material feminism, in turn, contests the human exceptionalism implied in this focus on *social relations* and practices as *transformative power*. This perspective is committed to a visualization of the agentive power of non-human materiality, of the openness in the processes of becoming, which cannot be attributed to the formative power of social forms. In its final consequence, this generalization of activity beyond the realm of the social/human, in turn, makes it difficult to distinguish any particular political commitment in terms of intentional interventions.

Interesting avenues for a diffractive confrontation of these perspectives can be found in Jacques Derrida’s problematizing that the concept of matter is “too often reinvested with ‘logocentric’ values, values asso-

ciated with those of a thing, reality, presence in general, sensible presence, for example, substantial plenitude, content, referent etc.” (Derrida 1981: 64). As Pheng Cheah points out, Derrida makes an intriguing remark (in *Spectres of Marx*) about his “obstinate interest in a materialism without substance” (Derrida in Cheah 2010: 72). This notion of a materialism without substance points to a helpful distinction between a notion of the material in terms of specific materializations (material-semantic phenomena) on the one hand and a concept of matter as a term that denotes the *impossible* on the other hand. Matter as radical alterity implies a specific non-phenomenality of matter. However, this non-phenomenality does not imply an absence: “It has happened that I have spoken of nonpresence, in effect, but by this I was designating less a negated presence, than ‘something’ (nothing, indeed, in the form of presence) that deviates from the opposition presence/absence (negated presence), with all that this opposition implies” (Derrida 1981: 95).

Derrida points to the specific textual economy within which the term “matter” does its work: the notion of matter as non-presence points to the excess of an opposition of presence/absence; matter is that which *exceeds* material-semiotic phenomena. Derrida acknowledges the term “materialist” as an adequate qualification of his own work “to the extent to which, *matter* in this general economy designates [...] radical alterity” (Derrida 1981: 64) and, significantly, he adds the specification that this radical alterity relates to philosophical oppositions: “if, and in the extent to which, *matter* in this general economy designates [...] radical alterity (*I will specify: in relation to philosophical oppositions*), then what I write can be considered ‘materialist’” (*ibid.*, emphasis added).

I think this specification is significant because it raises the question of the knowing subject in its historicity. It only makes sense to say that something is radically other, or *impossible*, in a particular way to or for a particular “someone”: to the subject committed to deconstructing philosophical oppositions of a logocentric economy from within. The specific predicament of this subject lies in the dynamics of a textual economy in which opposition to the classical notion of objectivity seems to lead to an irrevocable self-referentiality of language and signification (Chow 2006). Both historical materialism and new material feminism address this predicament. Gayatri Spivak, for instance, proposes a dis-continuist reading of Marx’s notion of the twofold nature of the com-

modity, positing use-value as “both outside and inside the system of value-determination” (Spivak 1996: 118). This reading avoids resorting to a self-referentiality of the social form (exchange-value); use-value becomes a deconstructive lever, disrupting the closure of this form. In a similar vein, Barad points to the dynamics of such a “deconstructive lever,” arguing that the notion of the constitutive outside should not be reduced to “an exteriority *within language*” (Barad 2003: 825), which would imply a self-referential concept of language “as an enclosure that contains the constitutive outside” (*ibid.*).

The constitutive outside, instead of referencing a presence, points to a radical heterogeneity. It is that which the social form, meaning, language can never fully grasp, confine, or determine—it is thus inaccessible to the subject operating within the epistemic economy of meaning, representing, and knowing. This subject plays an important—yet mostly not adequately acknowledged—role in historical materialism as well as in new material perspectives: it is the focus of hope that human-made problems can be solved by emancipatory action, and it is the focus of a critique of humanist presumptions that the world is shaped by human action. If it is reasonable to assume that both perspectives share the desire to make practical differences in order to “get more promising interference patterns on the recording films of our lives and bodies” (Haraway 1997: 16), this desire should be contextualized; the engagement with matter and material conditions should be seen as a specific desire of a specific historical subject.

### The Knowing Subject

New materialism opposes a perceived social determinism with the claim of bringing the material “into the forefront of feminist theory and practice” (Alaimo & Hekman 2008: 1). This can be read as a deconstructive move of overcoming dichotomies of culture and nature or meaning and materiality that prioritize culture and meaning while relegating nature and materiality to passivity. However, this move is primarily one of re-valuation, of establishing that matter, too, has agency, and as such it is only one of two deconstructive steps. Stopping at this move, the attempt to overcome representationalism leads to a “better” representation, an affirmation of matter as an agential presence—a reinvestment

of matter with logocentric values. The desire to bring the material “back in” should thus include the second deconstructive step of displacement, which locates matter as a constitutive condition in the heart of any meaning. This can account for the problem that, in our epistemic economy, any attempt to bring the material back in, or to acknowledge the agency of matter, *always is a representation*, an act of a specific subject with a specific political commitment.<sup>2</sup> At the same time this displacement decenters and unsettles the representation by acknowledging that it depends on inaccessible alterity, which it will never fully grasp.

The focus on the historical situatedness of the knowing or representing subject is crucial to Derrida’s work: “the project of grammatology is obliged to develop *within* the discourse of presence. It is not just a critique of presence but an awareness of the itinerary of the discourse of presence in one’s *own* critique, a vigilance precisely against too great a claim for transparency” (Spivak 1988: 293). This situatedness poses the question, or problem, of othering in its *historicity*: Derrida “articulates the *European Subject’s* tendency to constitute the Other as marginal to ethnocentrism and locates *that* as the problem with all logocentric and therefore also all grammatological endeavors [. . .]. *Not* a general problem, but a *European problem*” (*ibid.*).

This highlights social dimensions of human subjectivity: historical conditions shaping encounters of knowing subjects and their (human and non-human) others. In the case of the current feminist commitment to an engagement with matter, constitutive conditions are formed by the historical heritage of occidental metaphysics, enlightenment, capitalism, and colonialism. These conditions have to be acknowledged and taken into account in order to avoid conflating the notion of *the human* with a specific historical form of subjectivity. If it is not clearly specified, for instance, who (‘we?’) is engaging in a problematization of the dualism of human/non-human, this non-specification turns into a universalism that reestablishes the “West-centered humanism” (Schueller 2009: 237) it purports to overcome.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the notion of “overcoming” does not seem adequate to capture what is at stake with the problematization of dichotomies such as human/non-human. In this respect, we learn from Marx’s notion of materialism that to fundamentally question something (like foundational categories, dichotomies—or the commodity fetish) does not mean

that we can simply do away with it. The (human) subject can be deconstructed, questioned, and posited as a contingent historical figure, but it cannot be dissolved or overcome by rational decision. “We,” who discuss questions of mattering in the setting of late modern academia, are deeply mired in a form of subjectivity that is configured by a specific historical heritage—and as such we are provincial figures (Chakrabarty 2000), the contemporaries of other human subjectivities and non-human agents. As part of “our” heritage the notion of humanity—referencing an abstract sameness of all humans—is a powerful element of critique and emancipatory transformation. Nevertheless, it is a figure that is constituted by exclusions, drawing boundaries confining the definitions of a livable human life and thus constituting others—the non-human, the less developed, the pathological, but also the abject. These are problematic implications and effects; “certain versions of the subject are politically insidious” (Butler 1992: 13). The complicated, or even paradoxical, moment, however, is that “we” are the subjects that we need to criticize, this subjectivity is the condition of possibility for our political commitment: “I think ‘we’—that crucial material and rhetorical construction of politics and of history—need something called humanity. It is that kind of thing which Gayatri Spivak called ‘that which we cannot not want’” (Haraway 2004: 49).

As Spivak points out, the problem is that, in our desire to deconstruct binaries, “we must move from implied premises, that must necessarily obliterate or finesse certain possibilities that question the availability of these premises in an absolutely justifiable way” (Spivak 2001: 397). Deconstruction in this sense can be “a corrective and critical movement”; it cannot found a political program and there is no position of “a fully practicing deconstructor [. . .], the subject is always centered as a subject. You cannot *decide* to be decentered and inaugurate a politically correct deconstructive politics. What deconstruction looks at is the limits of this centering, and points at the fact that these boundaries of the centering of the subject are indeterminate and that the subject (being always centered) is obliged to describe them as determinate” (ibid.). We cannot *decide* to be open to the non-human dynamism of matter. But, given the shortcomings and violence of clear demarcations between nature/culture, human/non-human, active/passive, etc., we can be politically committed to finding and fashioning new ways of relating to alterity. Both

materialist perspectives, in their oppositional tension, offer important “sightings” for such commitment.

Historical materialism focuses on specific limits of our openness and responsiveness to alterity, and, by visualizing these limits as *social* relations, it argues that they can be practically rearranged and collectively refashioned in order to make possible other, hopefully less violent, relations to others. Marx’s analysis of capitalism offers important social explanations that account for the fact that many of our relations to (human) others (and their differences) are formed as relations of competition, that many relations to ourselves and to others are formed as relations of subjects/owners/users to resources, objects of utility, commodities. This perspective makes available options of addressing the conditions set by the capitalist mode of production as globalized structural impediments to ethically adequate relations—conditions that are socially transformable. That this political commitment involves a radical questioning of human exceptionalism is an important challenge put forward by new materialism, problematizing the notion of transformation by calling attention to: “a dynamism that obeys an inhuman temporality which is incalculable by human political reason because as the condition of possibility of both, it oscillates undecidably between the passive weightiness of nature and the active variability of culture and history” (Cheah 1996: 128).

### Rethinking Emancipatory Agency

Read with attention to their heretical tensions, both perspectives have valuable (in)sights to offer for emancipatory projects that want “to make a difference in material-semiotic apparatuses, to diffract the rays of technoscience so that we get more promising interference patterns on the recording films of our lives and bodies” (Haraway 1997: 16). Haraway is, in my understanding, clearly referring to social dimensions of reality that can be transformed or refashioned by collective human activity. At the same time she radically questions humanist notions of agency and emancipation. She explicitly acknowledges and problematizes that the assumption that our world can be actively arranged and transformed by human agency is a powerful heritage of modern enlightenment thought. This heritage is imbricated with all the problematic aspects of modernist thought—hierarchical dualisms, eurocentrism, androcentrism, and

anthropocentrism. Any engagement with this heritage has to be a *critical* engagement, but critique cannot simply do away with its problematic conditions of possibility—it has to work through them.

Haraway's commitment to questions of materiality is focused on the natural sciences, which she seems to endorse as a "space that [she] cannot want to inhabit and yet must criticize" (Spivak 1993: 70). Haraway even acknowledges the pleasure she takes in inhabiting this space: "A lot of my heart lies in old-fashioned science for the people, and thus in the belief that these Enlightenment modes of knowledge have been radically liberating; that they give accounts of the world that can check arbitrary power; that these accounts of the world ought to be in the service of checking the arbitrary" (Haraway 1991: 2). This could be interpreted as pleasure in engaging in practices of knowing that are, in part, responsible for what becomes real, the pleasure of being an active participant in the processes of "worlding." At the same time, this pleasure has a decidedly melancholic inflection; it has to acknowledge that our specific subjectivity, with all its violent, confining, and exclusionary implications, is all we have, it is the condition of possibility for our participation—it is that which we cannot not want, but can hope to refashion.

Haraway's specification that these practices of knowing may bring forth accounts that can *check the arbitrary* points to a critical refiguring of political commitments in terms of interventions that are not aimed at achieving certain definable goals. On the one hand, this is due to the insight that the world cannot be formed and fashioned according to a plan; it is not a passive matter that awaits human design. On the other hand, there is no singular human desire, no essential human nature or common good as benchmark for judgment and orientation. Collective action can hope to check the arbitrary by imagining and working on "the possibility of new entanglements of power, ones that do not escape power relations but that institute new arrangements of the lines of the *dispositif*" (Bell 2007: 25). We cannot escape the conditions of possibility of our participation—what we can hope is to learn to un-learn (Spivak 1985) confining assumptions and to refashion the material conditions in order to allow for less violent processes of becoming.

As a tentative conclusion I suggest that it is politically and ethically adequate to insist on representing social dimensions of our reality in order to visualize levers for transformative interventions. At the same

time it is crucial to question the premises, limits, and fault lines of such a perspective. In this sense a challenge of our times would be (*pace* Chakrabarty) to hold in a state of permanent tension two contradictory perspectives: On the one side is the production of knowledge about social structures and symbolic orders, on the other side "we" should elaborate new practices of knowing that aim for a potential of fantasy, for an imaginary that could let "us" experience and respond to inaccessible heterogeneity without needing to make it directly *accessible*.

#### NOTES

- 1 Sigrid Vertommen makes a similar point in this volume.
- 2 As Stephanie Clare points out in this volume, the new materialist injunction to pay attention to the more-than-human world is addressed to a *human* audience. She argues that the challenge of new materialism is not so much an inclusion of more-than-human agencies into the notion of politics but, rather, a radical questioning and refashioning of human subjectivity.
- 3 In this volume, Banu Subramaniam and Deboleena Roy address this problem, focusing on tendencies of decontextualizing and thus universalizing the notion of the body in new materialist analyses.

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