

# New Materialism, Technophilia and Emancipation

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## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to reflect on psychological, ethical and political implications of new materialisms (Barad, Bennett, Coole, Frost) in the context of expanded and accelerated regimes of measurement as part of a technological governance of the human. As new materialists are committed to both epistemic and political emancipation, I first analyse theoretical, in particular epistemological, foundations of new materialism. The new materialism has achieved liberating epistemic effects in criticizing self-referential discursive and socio-constructionist agendas. It argued instead for a return to material and somatic realities. However, I examine whether its flat ontology, its epistemology of de-differentiation of the human and non-human, even non-living agencies and commitments into a principle of immanence, provide appropriate means to critically assess ethical and political implications of entanglements of humans with the historically- produced technologies and social worlds in general. The next question to be discussed is whether a return (nevertheless a discursive one) to material and somatic realities can in itself protect those very vulnerable realities. As horizontal ontology invokes a horizontal normativity which cannot serve as a foundation for emancipatory projects, it follows that normativity needs other sources beyond the new materialism paradigm. Thus, I argue that such a weak or insecure position of normativity within the new materialisms affects any concept of human subject, regardless of its entanglements, and any project of emancipation. I conclude these critical analyses by claiming that the new materialism's epistemological and political emancipatory promises cannot be fulfilled by means provided by the new materialism itself.*

Keywords: new materialism, emancipation, historical materialism, flat ontology, agency

## Introduction

New materialism (or rather materialisms – for example, Barad, 2003, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Coole & Frost, 2010; Tuin, 2011) emerged at the beginning of the third millennium, in the strong belief that “it is now time to subject objectivity and material reality to a ...radical reappraisal... and to respond to insistent demands for more materialist modes of analysis

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and for new ways of thinking about matter and processes of materialization ...” (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 2).

New materialism is understood as a material turn, a turn toward matter and against linguistic, cultural and discursive turns which dominated social and human sciences over the past half century or so. Within their turn to forgotten matter, to matter that matters and “vibrant matter” (Bennett, 2010), new materialists are also arguing for rehabilitation of vitalist conceptions, whose origin they trace back to Bergson, Spinoza and even to Lucretius (Bennett, 2010). Meantime, there are also versions of new materialism which are described as speculative materialism (Meillassoux, 2008). This and other choices of new materialists show that they do not follow the orthodoxy of history of philosophy—instead they advance topics and authors more or less marginalized in master narratives inherited so far.

Even though many forerunners of new materialism have been identified and adopted, from antiquity through modernity (Spinoza, La Mettrie, H.D. Thoreau) to the twentieth century (Bergson), in the last decades of the twentieth century several authors articulated ideas which became core concepts of new materialisms. In that regard Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari (1977; 1987), Donna Haraway (1985) and Bruno Latour (1996) are particularly important. What they have in common is a turn away from a centration on human subjects and articulation of conceptual interests in non-humans, even non-living objects and inorganic processes. They transgressed inherited divisions and dichotomies such as humans–non-humans, human agency–things, subject–object, and nature–culture. Instead of a centuries-long fascination with humans, these authors share a fascination with technics and machines, beyond their use as tools of productions of material goods – instead technics and machines are seen as powerful actors in desiring-production (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977), or as actors in networks (Latour, 1996), or even as building new creatures – cyborgs (Haraway, 1985). New materialists refer with acknowledgment to Michel Foucault’s research, especially on body-disciplining practices. (Foucault, 1977). New materialisms have been fruitfully adopted also by feminist theories (Tuin, 2011).

At the the beginning of the new millennium, the context of the emergence of the new materialism provided new impetus for engaging with the previously addressed issues, but invited articulation of new concerns as well. Rapid technological developments are paralleled by rising ecological problems. Both paths are not just external context of the wide field of new materialisms. I would say that they have substantially shaped the social genesis of the new materialisms and assumed an important place on their theoretical agenda. The theoretical agenda is accompanied by a political one, which could be considered as a quite radical one. If it is correct to consider new materialisms as discursive responses to entanglements of technological development with environmental decay and social crisis, it is then even more important to critically examine whether such responses as provided by new materialisms could contribute to altering the threatening path of development – even more so in that many new materialists’ critical engagement with the existing order, and envisioning of alternate developments, is an indispensable part of their agenda. Rekret states that “the fundamental political import of the new materialist theories lies with their attempts to re-articulate what it means to be a political agent and the terrain upon which political struggle might be located” (2018, p. 51).

Therefore, it should not remain unnoticed that what is described as the material turn stands for many other turns – turns both towards and against. As its achievement could count that “there is no discipline in the humanities and social sciences that has not had some

engagement with these new materialisms, and some engagement in the sciences has also been important” – as stated by Devellenes and Dillet while questioning new materialisms (2018, p. 7) But the question to be raised is whether in this way weaknesses of new materialisms – and the present paper aims to show some of them – have affected the social and human sciences as well. Further consequences could be their lasting incapability of properly addressing fundamental problems that humanity is facing.

## The core agenda of new materialisms

### The context of emergence and the novelty claim

New materialisms have addressed many issues – ontological, anthropological, epistemological, ethical, political, economic, geological, biological, and ecological ones. They refer to philosophy (Greek philosophy, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Henry David Thoreau, Bergson, Deleuze, Guattari, Latour). They are very indebted to advances in natural sciences, especially referring to the quantum physics of Niels Bohr and generalizing its principle of indeterminacy by applying it to conceptions of the body and the social world (Barad, 2007). However, developments in the social and human sciences since the 1970s, characterized mostly by socio-constructionist approaches, are the target of their critique. They hoped to offer “escape from the limits of social constructivism” (Rekret, 2018, p. 58). Beyond that, new materialists have challenged basic assumptions underlying the modern world view and brought about quite radical changes in ways of thinking about basic categories of humans and things. On the agenda of new materialism is, among other challenging issues, acknowledgment of the “ubiquitous intensity of impersonal affect,” as stated by one of the leading figures of new materialism, Jane Bennett (2010, p. xiii). The program of new materialism includes re-articulation of the concept of the political, the political agent, and political struggles, which means refusal to “reduce *political* agency to *human* agency” (Bennett, 2010, p. xv; italics in original).

The general program of new materialism, as described by Jane Bennett, is oriented toward three main tasks:

to paint a positive ontology of vibrant matter, which stretches received concepts of agency, action, and freedom sometimes to the breaking point; (2) to dissipate the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic using arguments and other rhetorical means to induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality; and (3) to sketch a style of political analysis that can better account for the contributions of nonhuman actants. (Bennett, 2010, p. x)

The new materialism has emerged in an age that highly values novelty and plurality, even though very often without any interest to justify claims that qualitatively new and different options are available at all, not to speak of their values, viability, and availability to all individuals. Most importantly, the new materialism forgets that in fundamental questions of societal organization all attempt to try alternatives to hegemonic neo-liberal order have been systematically prevented or sanctioned, even by military means. It is worth reminding ourselves in this context that the new materialism’s emancipatory projects coincide with long-lasting harsh economic sanctions against the Cuban socialist project or Venezuelan attempts to resist adoption of a capitalist system – to mention just two rare examples of alternative societal projects. And decisions to impose sanctions against people in those

countries have been taken by human subjects, not by assemblages of things – even by a powerful single person. It is true, effectiveness of such measures is possible thanks to a geopolitical system, whose existence and perpetuation depends again on human subjects, those powerful enough to impose their will and those helpless to change such a system or even being forced to sustain it.

The new materialism is preferably understood as a plurality of new materialisms (Coole & Frost, 2010; Devellennes & Dittel, 2018). To use a favourite term of new materialism itself, i.e., assemblage, it could be said that there is an assemblage of materialisms. Beyond that and more importantly, new materialisms are committed to a pluralization of agency, for long time considered to be unique to humans. But it was their primary interest in matter and processes of materialization that gave the name to their program intended to bring about many reappraisals.

In view of an almost pandemic spread of discourses of pluralism, the task of defining new materialism is not so easy. Further, it is not so easy to define an approach that is so eager to transgress or abolish divisions. And definitions necessarily presuppose making divisions. In the context of questioning the new materialisms Devellennes and Dittel (2018) suggest three criteria whose fulfillment should qualify for acknowledgment of new materialism: novelty in theory, ontological claims regarding matter, and methodological consequences of ontological claims.

The insistence on novelty, fixed in the very name new materialism, contextualizes new materialisms as a product of the epoch obsessed by novelty. As novelty has generally a very high marketing value, it means that claims of novelty could be often more motivated by that incentive than founded on a proper justification. This is also a challenge posed to new materialisms. It is striking that even new materialists (Bennett, Coole, Frost) who acknowledge quite many precedents for their theories, including materialists in the past, nevertheless consider their materialism a new materialism.

In order to assess the claim of novelty defended by new materialists and their critique directed against the historical materialism I shall compare more extensively new materialisms and historical materialism. The justification for this choice is derived from both new materialisms and historical materialism. Among materialisms in the past Marxian historical materialism is particularly important – thanks to its theoretical achievements and socio-political influence. The claim of novelty of new materialisms has been put forward also regarding Marxian historical materialism. And this characterization occurs again within a discursive domain, which this time includes a longer historical perspective comparing to cultural or socio-constructionist turns targeted by the new materialisms' critique. However, it seems as if new materialists don't acknowledge that their critique occurs in a discursive domain, i. e. that a discursive referent is indispensable for the material turn argued for by new materialists.

Given the emancipatory agendas that both Marxist historical materialism and new materialisms advocate, this aspect of positioning of new materialisms deserves special reflective attention. Diana Coole (2013) coined the term “capacious historical materialism” to express her understanding of political capacities of the new materialism. However, some critical authors argue that it is necessary to take into account some external conditions in assessing attitude of new materialists toward Marxian historical materialism.

Why is it that there is a need for a clean break with the past for our topic in particular? It may be that the spectre of Marxism looms large over theories of materialism, and that it has become difficult (particularly in the United States) to use Marxism in a critical and engaged manner. It is certainly evident that Coole, Frost, and Bennett have all been influenced in part by Marx and Marxism more generally, but are reluctant to bring this connection to the fore of their work. (Develennes & Dillet, 2018, p. 8)

There is more to be examined regarding relationship of new materialists to historical materialism, even more so as some leading new materialists, for example Jane Bennett, insist that “dogged resistance to anthropocentrism is perhaps the main difference between the vital materialism I pursue and this kind of historical materialism.” (Bennett, 2010, p. xvi).

However, it is worth letting Marx (and Engels) speak for themselves about their historical materialism. It should be recalled that Marx and Engels in their time argued for new materialism, after pointing out limitations of “all previous materialism” represented in their case mostly by Feuerbach. The main objection made by Marx against Feuerbachian materialism is its neglect of an active, productive role of human subjects in their relation to the world. In the first thesis on Feuerbach Marx stated:

The chief defect of all previous materialism (including Feuerbach’s ) is that the object actuality, sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the *object or perception [Anschauung]*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice [Praxis]*, not subjectively. (Marx, 1845/1994, p. 99; italics in original)

This is also a crucial feature that distinguishes humans from animals as it is through such attitudes and practice that humans create their history. This distinction is very important to historical materialism, and this is one of distinctions new materialists argued against, in the framework of their general critique of anthropocentrism. However, some questions are pressing in that regard: can any critique of anthropocentrism justify the abolition of the distinction between human and animal species? Are we better equipped to grasp the world if we abandon this distinction? Are we better equipped to address social, epistemic or hermeneutic injustices if we abandon distinctions between humans, animals and things and give voices to things instead to humans?

Marxist historical materialism showed that a materialist account of history, even a radical one, is compatible with the acknowledgment of distinctions between humans and animals, and things. And Marx has in no way ignored the role of things in human world, neither has he ignored nature. But he analysed things within a historical-materialist framework, showing that human labor and social relations determine their values. In the same way nature is seen as an object of historically changeable human activity. From such a perspective Marx has warned of fetishizing things and naturalizing social phenomena. Both fallacies continue to characterize much of contemporary consciousness and scientific theoretizations.

### **Agencies in new materialisms**

It seems that new materialisms are not aware of the dangers of fetishizing things and dehumanizing humans. To them, matter matters in itself, things have their agentic capabilities, and humans have to retreat from the central position. It was La Mettrie in the

eighteenth century who subsumed humans under machines—“man-a machine”—and ascribed agentic features to a wide realm. As Jane Bennett acknowledges her indebtedness to La Mettrie, the question arises: what is then new in new materialisms? It could be that advances of technology make the same old ideas of materialism more attractive.

In new materialism things have been accredited surplus value because they are conceptualized as thing-power, having

the capacity ... to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own ... Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience. (Bennett, 2010: viii; xvi)

Bennett gives an example of agentic capacities of omega-3 fatty acid “affecting” human mood (Bennett, 2010, p. vii). This extension of agentic capacities means that humans are deprived of specific agentic capabilities. However, in a kind of a non-recognized self-refuting move, new materialists rely on strategic anthropomorphism: “We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism – the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature – to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (Bennett, 2010, p. xvi).

Beyond the self-confidently proclaimed overcoming of the traditional epistemological and ethical division between humans and things, to which new materialists are committed, I think that a reference to the psychological developmental processes in the relation between humans and things could be epistemically fruitful for a critical reappraisal. For human agentic capabilities are not given, they have to be developed, and for that to be achieved different kinds of social and cultural tools, including things, are needed. Those tools are not mere things, they can fulfill their developmental function only if they are transformed through human activity. In that way they change both the human subjects and the world they live in. Symbolic tools (words) from tools of interpersonal communication become internalized as tools of mental operations (verbal thinking, logical memory) (Vygotsky, 1931/1997). Thus it is not matter in itself that matters, it is human activity that brings it about that some matter matters and some other matter or matter at another place and time does not matter. Paradoxical as it may seem, new materialisms cannot hold consistently to their own main claim that matter matters in itself. Needless to say that flat ontology does not secure that humans matter – at least in social practices not all human matter(iality) matters. This is psychologically and ethically very relevant.

### **The political and ecological agenda**

The difficulties of the new materialisms become even more complicated when it comes to their political agenda. Jane Bennett (2010) explicates: “The political project ...is,...to encourage more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and lively things. A guiding question: How would politica responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?”(p. vii).

However, it is worth mentioning some previous insights. Marx has rightly pointed out that old materialisms which does not comprehend sensual human activity as constituting sensuous objects cannot transcend the level of individual subjects: “The highest point attained by perceptual materialism, that is, materialism that does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is the view of separate individuals and civil society.”

(Marx 1845/1994, p.100). In the next, tenth thesis on Feuerbach it is clarified that a reference to society is what substantially distinguishes Marx's historical materialism from the old materialism: "The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society [bürgerliche Gesellschaft]: the standpoint of the new is human society [menschliche Gesellschaft] or socialized humanity [vergesellschaftete Menschheit]" (Marx 1845/1994, p.101; German expressions added for clarification).

As new materialisms go even further back than old materialism in Marxian view, and while adopting assumptions of redistributed agency, and collapse of the distinction of matter and thought, they fall even below "the view of separate individuals". Is it then possible to reach socio-political realm new materialists are striving for? In his critical assessment of political implications of new materialism Rekret, relying on Marx, questions the feasibility of political agenda of new materialisms:

Taking my cue from Marx, this essay affirms the limitations of new materialist attempts to reconcile if not collapse the cultural and the natural, thought and world. Posing the question of 'separation', or rather its neglect, I will claim, has profound effects on the terrain and scale upon which the political is theorized. It is my central contention that failure to pose the question of 'separation' in materialist terms obscures the political processes by which abstractions such as 'man' or 'nature' are constituted and, accordingly, produces a political voluntarism that fails to confront its own conditions. (Rekret, 2018, p. 52)

Marx's task was to provide a materialist account of human history that would allow for a more self-conscious and free involvement of humans in making their future history in which there will be no exploitation, no repression, no social inequalities. Obviously, it is neither matter nor animals that prevent such a course of history, but humans, i.e. the way they organize their societies, their means and relations of production. For the "human society" to be developed it is necessary, in 'Marx's view, to lay down foundation for "practical-critical" activity already at the basic level of relations of humans to objects.

The primary subject-matter of historical materialism is the historical constitution of humans and human society. It is the most important achievement to connect materialism and history, i.e., to develop materialism as a historical materialism. In the long history of materialism (Lange, 1866/1974) elaboration of this relation was missing.

It is worth quoting a longer passage from *The German Ideology*, which Marx and Engels wrote in 1845/1846, but it remained unpublished until 1932. It is there that they first exposed main ideas of historical materialism, even though in Engels' view, Marx's theses on Feuerbach are "the first document in which is deposited the brilliant germ of the new world outlook" (Engels, 1888, no pagination).

The premises...are the real individuals, their actions, and their material conditions of life, those they find existing as well as those which they produce through their actions...The first premise of all human history, of course, is the existence of living human individuals. (The first *historical* act of these individuals, the act by which they distinguish themselves from animals is not the fact that they think but the fact that they begin to *produce their means of subsistence*.)...All historiography must proceed from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the actions of men. (Marx & Engels, 1845-1846/1994, p. 107; italics in original)

In historical materialism human individuals, through their actions, produce changes in matter, in things, but also in themselves and in other individuals. Humans are necessarily oriented toward objects, their actions are object-dependent. Object-directedness of human psychic processes, i. e. intentionality is a general structural feature of psyche, as defined already in scholastics (Thomas Aquinas), and then taken over by Brentano and Husserl's phenomenology. Object-directedness has become a kind of materialist intentionality in historical materialism. It is important to stress that by acting on things human actors change themselves as well. Thus, historical materialism has shown that history is a process of self-constitution of humans. Of course, there are limits to possible changes and changes do not necessarily correspond to human intentions. The producers can be and indeed are alienated from their products, even from themselves. But in spite of all these complexities, mediations, and alienation, to historical materialism there are and cannot be any other agencies of historical development than humans themselves – of course, humans as social beings.

In contrast, new materialisms have shifted agentic productivity to non-humans and things. There is no doubt that this makes new materialisms very different from historical materialism. But what is the sense of the proclaimed “new”? I would argue that it is a new that is regressive, i.e., that abandons important insights provided by historical materialism into human, subjective activity in producing and constituting objects in human worlds. Paradoxically, it is a “new” that is actually the old one. Jane Bennett indeed used an ontogenetic regressive comparison to position her claim that “vital materiality can start to take shape. Or, rather, it can take shape again, for a version of this idea already found expression in childhood experiences of a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects”(Bennett, 2010, p. vii).

It is important to bear in mind that analysis of commodity allowed Marx to reconstruct the ways in which capitalist society functions. He elucidated the deep entanglements of nature, things, humans and society. But if commodity is translated back into self-containing things, as suggested by new materialists, the result will be a juxtaposition of plurality of different things which should be allowed to perform their own intra-activity. However, the intra-activity of things can never replace the actions of human political subjects.

Does the new redistribution of agency (and responsibility) at the expense of humans, and in favour of non-humans and things, make new materialism more capable to address ecological and societal problems? Jane Bennett answers that question: “why advocate the Vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption” (Bennett, 2010, p. ix).

In fact, the dominant expansive instrumental attitude of humans toward nature has to be changed as it has devastated natural resources and produced climate change, yet it has not abolished hunger and poverty. In that sense, ecological concerns of the new materialists are justified. But they are not quite new: before the new materialists Gregory Bateson (1972) warned that such an instrumental and arrogant attitude toward the environment and nature would lead to annihilation of humanity. But this is not just a question of new concepts as rightly argued by Rekret:

conceptual abstraction or the symbolic distinction of nature and culture are themselves the result of the forcible separation of direct producers from their means of production and are continuous



with those social relations...new materialists underestimate both the conditions for overcoming those mediations but also the conditions of substantive social transformation. (Rekret, 2018, p. 55)

Paradoxically enough, in that way, the new materialists, beyond their claims, come closer to discursive approaches than to materialist accounts. In other words, to advocate the “vitality of matter,” as mentioned above by Bennett, is a discursive gesture. Even new materialists cannot dispense with discursive means, but it seems as if they ignore both their own indispensable discursive embeddedness and the limits of discursive accounts which certainly cannot be sufficient to change the material and social conditions under which the conquest of nature is going on. In spite of their very critical attitude toward linguistic, cultural and socio-constructivist turns, as well as to older forms of materialism, new materialists lay claim to being adherentst of a positive ethos. Thus, the new materialists’ insufficiently reflective critique is paralled by their positive ethos:

The prevailing ethos of new materialist ontology is consequently more positive and constructive than critical or negative: it sees its task as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter's immanent vitality. Such thinking is accordingly post- rather than anti-Cartesian. It avoids dualism or dialectical reconciliation by espousing a *monological* account of emergent, generative material being. (Coole & Frost, 2018, p. 7; italics added)

However, it should be noted that the positive ethos – and its psychological articulation in form of positive psychologies should not be forgotten in this context – has beyond its seductive surface some other facets as well. By focusing on the positive, again with discursive means, and drawing attention away from problems and conflicts, the real problems will not disappear. Quite the contrary, because they are deprived even of discursive attention they remain unsolved and continue to generate new ones. In that way, the positive ethos eventually contributes to the reproduction of the existing order, including all its injustices, discrimination, inequalities. Additionally, the positive ethos, through its widespread usage in marketing, shows that calls for caution because of possibilities of its intentional manipulation should be taken seriously.

It is surprising in the quote above, that two quite engaged representatives of new materialism, next to the commitment to the positive ethos, refer to the *monological* account as an example of a preferable overcoming of dualisms and divisions. It is clear, in a monolog no other side, no other voice can be heard, but this does not mean that they do not exist. It is rather the case that they are ignored or actively silenced. What is recommended in materialist ontology is a “monological account of emergent, generative material being.” But the question to be raised here is: if a monological account is recommended for all future emergent states of material being, and as matter is considered active, intra-active, this means that new states will constantly emerge, how can this monological account grasp those different states.? If all future states of material being have to be subjected to the monological account, the differences will be discursively erased. A further consequence will be that in this way matter will be again discursively deprived of those features which new materialists revived after they were, in their view, ignored for a long time. Thus, ironically enough, by insisting on the “monological account of emergent, generative material being” new materialists work against their own assumption and become entangled in contradictions. This is another example of a peculiar thinking pattern new materialists are putting forward.

It seems that their attentional and conceptual focus on matter has generated substantial weakness on the side of self-reflection. Given the political agenda new materialists are committed to, the relevance of this weakness transcends the pure logical and theoretical domain.

## Flat ontology

The new materialisms have turned to matter as their core subject-matter forgotten during the dominance of discursive approaches, which, in their view, neglected material and somatic realities while privileging language and discourses. Iris van der Tuin explained that “the new materialism wants to move away from such linguisticism” (Tuin, 2011, p. 271). Next, new materialisms have rehabilitated processual, active, intra-active, vibrant, vital, even agentic features of matter unrecognized within classical materialism. As a consequence, they redistributed agency capacities among humans, non-humans and even things. This redistribution has brought about empowerment of things (thing-power) and decentering from humans considered for a long time to be the only subjects with agentic status. By the new materialists conceptual redistributions are affected -- not just ontological categories including matter, living matter, non-humans, and humans – but also logical categories of genera and species:

while an ontology based on relations between general types and particular instances is hierarchical, each level representing a different ontological category (organism, species, genera), an approach in terms of interacting parts and emergent wholes leads to a flat ontology, one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status. (DeLanda, 2004, p. 58)

Flat ontology is certainly one of the most challenging claims characterizing new materialisms. This conceptual egalitarian move has a strong ethical and political appeal, but the question is whether it has discursive power sufficient to shake hierarchies in material reality, not to mention their abolition. Given the rising social inequalities recorded all over the world, and most dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic, in which supposedly all are in the same boat, the question whether flat ontology has discursive power sufficient to shake hierarchies in material reality turns to be a pure rhetorical one. Ironically enough, the material turn can generate discursive turns only, while material, including somatic realities continue to be reproduced as hierarchies among and within their vibrant wholes. It seems the discovery of vibrant processes in matter has not led to emergence of vibrant changes in socio-political realities, sufficient to overthrow hierarchies and inequalities. Regrettably enough, social ontology is not a flat ontology. A recent example: “On a day when the US announced economic growth overall had collapsed by a record-setting 32.9%, Amazon reported a profit of \$5.2bn for the quarter and sales of \$88.9bn, 40% higher than the same period last year” (*The Guardian*, 30. July 2020, no pagination).

What is then the status and function of the model of flat ontology within hierarchical social ontology? It could be that egalitarian appeal of flat ontology – even beyond social equality – instead of initiating processes of removing and changing structures generating social inequalities obscures their very existence and in this way inhibits approaches which are motivated by the recognition of existence of hierarchical structures and commitments to work toward their change. This is a special challenge to those new materialist orientations

which are explicitly committed to political changes and are characterized as critical materialism (Coole & Frost, 2010).

There is another aspect of flat ontology of new materialisms which is understood by Paul Rekret as a failure with significant socio-political implications: “I take as a crippling lacuna at the core of the new materialism paradigm: the absence of any account of the division of the mental and material as itself situated upon the terrain of social struggle or antagonism” (Rekret, 2018, p. 51). New materialism has ignored important insights of historical materialism – even behind reified phenomena there are social relations, and mostly antagonistic relations which cannot be made non-existent by declaring an egalitarian ontology and dismissing real contradictions at the core of societal order.

### **Critique of anthropocentrism**

Another commitment of new materialisms is critique of anthropocentrism. It is closely related to flat ontology, obviously, as anthropocentrism is incompatible with flat ontology. Historically speaking, the first anthropocentric views originated in the fifth century B.C. in Greek philosophy, whose most famous dictum was Protagora’s claim: “Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are that they are and of the things that are not that they are not” (Plato, *Theaetetus* 151e, Sextus *Against the Mathematicians* VII.60 (=DK 80B1). However, it was only modernity that developed anthropocentrism as a powerful epochal agenda. Therefore, new materialists critique and rejection of anthropocentrism is also directed against modernity. At the same time, while sharing with postmodernism a decentred position for humans, new materialists are very critical of the postmodern privileging of language.

An additional positioning of new materialism that is very relevant to its understanding and assessment is within the framework of anthropocene. It is within this framework that new materialists express their most important ecological concerns (Conty, 2018). The problems characterizing that period in natural history which is substantially determined by human activity (climate change, warming, pollution, deforestation, exhaustion of resources, endangered bio-diversity, shifts in contacts among species which bring about illnesses, including pandemic etc.) are indeed strong arguments against anthropocentrism. In that sense, the critical position of new materialists is wholly justified. However, paradoxically enough, the anthropocene problems cannot be solved unless the cause of the problems, i.e. human activity, human values and attitudes assume a central place in socio-political programs. “New materialists have provided some new conceptual tools to make the Anthropocene as a ‘hyperobject’ more understandable, and yet its Latourian strand has failed to provide a programmatic perspective” (Develennes & Dillet, 2018, p. 12).

It is not matter itself, regardless how vibrant it might be, which can stop or reverse pollution or deforestation. Obviously, human life on our planet is not possible without human activity. The point is to change that activity, and that change is urgently needed, for sure. Thus, I would claim that anthropocene could provide arguments for a new centering of humans, a centering which would include all levels of context, natural and social ones, long term perspectives, a general reflective attitude, care as a *modus vivendi* instead of exploitation of nature and other humans alike. All these changes have to be accomplished at the level of human subjects as agents, but they are not their autopoietic achievements. In order to achieve those changes radical changes of societal orders are needed. And again, those societal changes cannot be generated by matter, but by human subjects. From the fact that matter influences humans, be that electrons or coal, does not follow that there is no substantial

difference between causation as a capability of matter and intentionality as a capability of human subjects. Matter can be reconceptualised as active or intra-active agency, but what is needed are common, conscious, intentional activities of human subjects. It is not even possible to conceptualize a program without assuming an intentional agency. In the same way as humans and the modus of organization of modern societies are responsible for the current crises, they cannot be exempted from responsibility for their solution. Dominant modern conceptualizations of matter as passive, bare stuff available to human interventions are not achievements of matter, but historical achievements of humans, whose accumulated effects shape environmental and societal crises humanity is facing nowadays. New conceptualizations of matter are not caused by matter itself but by intentional reflective activity of human actors.

Technological materialization of matter has brought about unprecedented changes not just in environment, but more importantly in psychological functioning of human subjects. The mediation of basic mental functions – perception, memory, thinking, and emotion--transforms both their structure and function, as convincingly demonstrated by Vygotsky (1931/1997) almost hundred years ago. It would be wise to bear in mind that no self-consciousness can develop without sign-mediation. Thus, sign-mediation and more generally tool-mediation is a powerful mechanism which transforms psychic functions into specifically human cultural functions, distinguishing them from natural functions which humans share with higher species of animals (Jovanović, 2019).

In contrast, new materialisms argue for equal status of inorganic and organic matter, non-human nature and human culture. But such a position does not allow us to account for the existence of humans and human culture. In a world based on a supposed flat ontology, humans and human culture could not have appeared at all. In other words, new materialisms cannot explain developmental processes which necessarily imply structural differentiation between higher and lower stages, expressed also in differences between non-living matter and living matter and then differentiation among species of living matter.

The necessity not to erase differences in the status of matter or technics and humans is even more urgent when it comes to bio-technology. As bio-politics is one of the main concerns of new materialism, it is also a challenge to it. Rather than advocating responsibility of non-human actants, it is urgent to put humans at the centre – both as the subjects and objects of bio-politics. And again, the best possible univerzalization of humans is necessary, i.e., a concept of humans in which different articulations of the human could be recognized.

Another inconsistency appears when new materialists position themselves, as already mentioned, as sharp critics of cultural, discursive and socio-constructionist turns. In their view:

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing”– even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation”. (Barad, 2003, p. 801)

However, to Sara Ahmed “Barad is offering a caricature of ‘the turns’ in recent theory”(Ahmed, 2008, p. 34). Nevertheless, new materialists consider previous turns “being deemed inadequate for understanding contemporary society, particularly in light of some of its most urgent challenges regarding environmental, demographic, geopolitical, and

economic change” (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 3). Against such a critical positioning it is striking that new materialists hardly note the fact that the material turn they are committed to is itself a discursive turn. The tools used in that turn are discursive tools. To be sure, language and discourse cannot be escaped by declaring a material turn. But at the same time it is true that different discursive tools draw conceptual attention and nurture sensitivity to different aspects of the processes in the world, co-constituting in that way different symbolic realities, which are indispensable dimensions of reality humans live in. For seeing matter as passive stuff or as vibrant intra-activity discursive eyes are necessary. Before appropriate discursive tools became available vibrant intra-activity of matter was not visible to humans. Matter did not leave its previous passive status and did not start in itself vibrating at the beginning of the millennium. New discursive tools could grasp intra-activity of matter, while previous tools were capable of seeing just passive matter. An instructive example is the transition from a geocentric to a heliocentric model of the universe. Obviously, earth did not start revolving in 1543 when Nicolaus Copernicus published his seminal work *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium (On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres)* marking the transition to the heliocentric model.

The very signification “this is a material turn” performs a speech act (Searle, 1995). And it is thanks to this act that constitution of features of a specifically human social reality is possible at all. Even the decentring of humans cannot escape its discursive constitution and therefore it cannot transform human social reality into a reality existing independently of humans. New materialism is an aspect of that human reality, it could not and would not exist if there were no humans arguing for or against it.

Even though there are claims made by new materialists of entanglement of matter and meaning (Barad, 2007), it is matter that matters. From the context of origin of new materialism it is clear that this was a reaction to the previous neglect of matter and processes of materialization within socio-constructionist approaches. But the same could be said about the genesis of discursive and socio-constructionist approaches – they were also reactions to a long-lasting neglect of role of language and its formative functions in shaping human reality. The position of new materialism would be more convincing if it had not repeated the overreaction in an attempt to compensate for previous neglects.

Beyond that, focusing on matter at the expense of a relative neglect of meaning in new materialism has particularly important implications for the understanding of humans and for political agendas that new materialists argue for as emancipatory projects. I would argue that without granting a proper place and acknowledging an indispensable role of meaning-making processes and their symbolic articulations by human political agents, it is not even possible to conceive of political struggles and emancipatory projects. Nevertheless, it should be made clear that the critique of inconsistencies in self-understanding of new materialisms, intended in this paper, does not imply that their critique of absolutist claims of discursive approaches should be dismissed. Instead, I will argue that a more reflective approach to the relation between material and discursive turns is needed.

From these general self-positionings of new materialism I would conclude that new materialism is entangled in its inherent contradictions. In other words, it cannot consequently stand for its own assumptions and claims. Starting with a justified critique of absolutist claims of discursive approaches and anthropocentrism, new materialism is not attentive enough to differentiate between unjustified absolutist claims and justified rational insights of discursive approaches and modern anthropocentric agenda. It seems, it is not so

easy to avoid temptations of critique. Commitments to novelty, inscribed in the name of new materialism, makes the task even more difficult.

## Concluding remarks

New materialisms are the most radical critiques of anthropocentrism as it was inaugurated in its historically unique generative form by modernity. Therefore they qualify to be considered as belonging to a broader turn named posthumanism.

Posthumanism poses a radical challenge to psychology understood as a study of human experience and activity as they are occurring in historically- and culturally-constituted human worlds. Even though images of soul and spirits as forces populating humans, animals and even objects can be found since the oldest times of human prehistory, and philosophy served for a long time as a home for psychological speculations, genesis of psychology as a science is substantially embedded in structures of modern epoch. Without a socio-historically constituted modern individual as the subject of experience and without the generalization of individual subjects in different domains of life (knowledge, art, economy, law, society as a whole) (Jovanović, 1997), psychology would not have been possible. Psychology is a product of modernity, but it is also a response to demands and problems of the new historical epoch (Danziger, 1990; Jaeger & Staueble, 1978; Rose, 1998). The response is not always a direct response, various hermeneutical and deep hermeneutical entanglements are possible – to mention just one example when Adorno saw in the boom of psychology an expression of rising inhumanity

With the intensification of social antagonisms, clearly, the thoroughly liberal and individualistic concept of psychology tends increasingly to forfeit its meaning. The pre-bourgeois order does not yet know psychology, the over-socialized society knows it no longer.

Analytic revisionism is the counterpart of such a society. It is commensurate with the shifting relation between society and the individual. The social power-structure hardly needs the mediating agencies of ego and individuality any longer. An outward sign of this is, precisely, the spread of so-called ego-psychology, whereas in reality the individual psychological dynamic is replaced by the partly conscious and partly regressive adjustment of the individual to society. (Adorno, 1968, p. 95)

In the same way as “the spread of so-called ego-psychology” did not strengthen the spread of strong individuality half a century ago, the proliferation of agencies via new materialism’s claims nowadays does not induce politically transformative agentic outcomes. It would be wise to be attentive to Rekret’s warnings:

the new materialist claim that agency flourishes in the contemporary world risks functioning as an alibi for any investigation or political contestation of the increasingly complex and authoritarian forms by which our mental and manual labour and our relation to nature fall under capitalist control. (Rekret, 2028, p. 64-65).

The social power structures have meantime become even more powerful than half a century ago, when Adorno articulated these insights into the dynamics of relationship of society and individuals. Do new materialisms provide appropriate conceptual tools to grasp and possibly change the new destructive patterns? Is matter -- liberated from constraints of passivity, linear heterocausality and “reenchanted” with agentic capabilities -- a sufficient tool to

address powerful actors whose power does not derive from their somatic materiality but from positions in social relations? Certainly there are reified relations and positions but they acquire and exercise power not thanks to their materiality, but thanks to society which evaluates some matter and some bodies more worthy and some others less worthy, or even unworthy of living. Criteria of evaluation are not given in matter itself. Evaluation is indeed a feature of human subjects in their engagement with things, other subjects and the world. (Taylor, 1985).

Even though changes in natural sciences, including new conceptualizations of matter, could become a source of inspiration for changes in social and human sciences, as hoped by Barad (2007), such a hope already presupposes a flat ontology, i.e., the idea that there is no substantial ontological and axiological difference between non-living matter and human beings. But there are no reasons why this assumption should be exempted from critical reappraisal – in the same way as anthropocentrism should be and has been subjected to a critical reappraisal.

Indeed, I would argue, the new materialism's critique of old materialism, then of the discursive turn and modern anthropocentrism, cannot provide the foundations for a sustainable emancipatory program for many reasons. What is missing are both material and normative foundations. Matter can be proclaimed to be active or intra-active, but it is the social position of poor people which allows their lives to be dominated by a dramatic lack of matter, of basic material goods, including water, and food, and shelter. It is not that after matter has been declared active that it starts building houses, even though obviously matter is a necessary material. To make that matter be "active", i.e. working for the homeless, radical political changes are necessary, i.e. changes in social structures that generate conditions of work and life, making some bodies, actually bodies of many human subjects unworthy of material shelter.

The request for change of existing dominant politics is a strong normative claim, whose source cannot be matter, as expected by new materialists. Even intra-active matter lacks self-evaluation capability necessary for normative acts which constitute emancipation. It is normativity that introduces a radical discontinuity into social ontology. By erasing – voluntaristically – that discontinuity, new materialisms remain bound to political "quietists", as rightly criticized by Rekret (2018).

The question that arises for the new materialism is thus: under which conditions can technological advances become emancipatory rather than disciplinary, and which social and political theory would enable this healing pharmacological dimension to emerge? (Develennes & Dillet, 2018, p. 15)

To conclude I will argue: new materialism, in the plurality of its strands, cannot stand on its own basic ontological and political claims. The emancipatory project of the transformation of the social totality still lacks both its firm theoretical foundations and sustainable materialization.

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### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank my colleague William R. Woodward from New Hampshire University for his generous help in fixing my self-taught English.

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