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From ‘Materialism’ towards ‘Materialities’

THE EDITORS

THE ACTUALITY OF MATERIALISM

What is the relevance of materialism for thinking politics? Throughout modernity, materialism has been associated with fatalism, naturalism, heresy, atheism, and linked to political ideas such as republicanism, democracy, and communism. In the nineteenth century, the field of confrontation in which materialism was engaged shifted beyond the theoretical and political dimensions to encompass the economic and the social as well. Materialism dethroned the conception of an abstract political subject and the centrality of state institutions in favour of a materialist critique centred on the materiality of social relations. However, the development of contemporary capitalism transformed the meaning of such a critique. The policies of neoliberal capitalism have sought to expand control beyond the state to regulate the materiality of social reproduction itself. Through multiple forms of expropriation, neoliberal policies have aimed at controlling the bodies and, more broadly, the materialities underlying the processes of capitalist domination.

This context has led to a reconsideration of the notion of ‘matter’, which is once more at the heart of the political arena — whether in the form of subject’s bodies or of rivers and mountains endowed

with legal personality. In this sense, materialism has regained influence at the centre of philosophical debates as the doctrine most suitable to embrace the various and at times dissonant, even contradictory, interpretations of matter and its activity.

Far from representing a unified discourse or trend, materialism has multiple definitions and uses. In the contemporary discursive field we can observe two main currents: on the one hand, what has recently been called ‘New Materialism’,¹ and on the other a ‘(post-)Marxist materialism’ (or a renewed ‘historical materialism’, or ‘dialectical materialism’).² Although these two interpretations are not completely op-

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- 1 See, in particular, the collective volumes edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) as well as by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012). They both offer a genealogy of the expression ‘New Materialism’, as well as an overview of its authors and internal debates. According to the editors of the latter, the term appeared in the second half of the 1990s and was first used by authors such Manuel DeLanda and Rosi Braidotti, themselves echoing themes developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour. Among the most prominent and representative publications of this trend, we could also mention Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) and Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
 - 2 The renewal of Marxism and Marxist-based materialism is surely an older movement and can be traced back to the end of the 1960s. It is a far less homogenous trend and in fact appears in several different modes. All of them address, however, the limits of traditional Marxism and acknowledge the need to redress it. It is strongly represented in France, for example, by Louis Althusser and his group of students (see *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition* (London: Verso, 2016)). Even if this collective volume has mostly privileged readings from this French tradition, the contemporary return to Marx and the notion of materialism can also be traced back to other trends, such as, first, the Frankfurt School — and the renewal of ‘philosophical materialism’, ‘historical materialism’, ‘dialectical materialism’, or even ‘interdisciplinary materialism’, through which the early writings by Max Horkheimer have tried to define the Institute for Social Research; second, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s ‘discursive materialism’ and the revision of ‘historical materialism’ understood as ‘radical relationalism’ (cf. *Facundo Vega’s contribution to this volume*); third, Robert Kurz’s further development of Marx’s ‘theory of value’ and ‘the general truth of the materialist thesis as it pertains to the process of human development as a whole’ (‘The Crisis of Exchange Value: Science as Productive Force; Productive Labour; and Capitalist Reproduction (1986)’, in *Dossier: Marxism and the Critique of Value*, ed. by Neil Larsen, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson, and Nicholas Brown (= *Meditations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group*, 27.1–2 (2013–14)) <https://www.mediationsjournal.org/toc/27_1> [accessed: 15 November 2020]); fourth, Antonio Negri’s engagement with the notion of materialism and the critique of the ‘transcendental foundation of power’. Negri’s work goes in the direction of a reappraisal of materialism’s classic reductionism (including those of the ‘dialectical materialism’) towards what he calls a ‘materialism of *praxis*’ or a ‘rigorous materialism’ capable of maintaining ‘the tension between actual determination and

posed, they do highlight different dimensions of what one understands by materialism and, above all, they employ different argumentative strategies. Proponents of New Materialism tend to return to physics to re-found an ontology that stresses the activity of things, thus expanding political agency far beyond the human realm and criticizing anthropocentric policies. On the other hand, (post-)Marxist proponents tend to revise and renew the Marxist tradition by addressing other forms of domination that were not traditionally taken into account, such as gender, race, colonialism, and ecological exploitation.

The aim of this book is not to propose a reconciliation or a synthesis of these different materialist tendencies, but to portray their great variety and even contradictions *without* excluding the possibility of an encounter between them. As the reader will notice in the organization of our sections, we have chosen some main areas of encounter or common ground among the many possible ones, including the actuality of Baruch Spinoza's materialism, the renewal of theories of the 'milieu', feminist theories on matter, and critical reappraisals of historical materialism.³ Other encounters, such as the crossroads between materialism and ecology as well as with post- and de-colonial perspectives, are still engaged with, despite not being the main areas of focus of this volume (for example, in the contributions from **Frieder Otto Wolf** and **Alex Demirović**).

Regarding Spinoza's materialism, a consideration must be made. Historians of philosophy have clarified the restricted sense in which Spinoza can be said to be a 'materialist'. He never used the term 'materialism' (that was posterior to his work) and more readily writes 'extension' instead of 'matter'. In this sense, they have argued that one can say only that he is a materialist if one understands by materialism a 'principle of intelligibility of reality based on extension' (though extension cannot give a principle of intelligibility for the whole reality).⁴ Since

constitutive project within the fullness of subjects' (*Time for Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 128).

- 3 Each part has an introduction: Stefan Hagemann for **Part I**, Marlene Kienberger and Bruno Pace for **Part II**, Alison Sperlberg for **Part III**, and Daniel Liu for **Part IV**. The starting point of this book is the conference *Materialism and Politics* held at the ICI Berlin and the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin in April 2019, where each session was introduced by moderators, who agreed to once again introduce a part here.
- 4 Chantal Jaquet, *Les Expressions de la puissance d'agir chez Spinoza* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2005) <<https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pSORbonne.127>>, in particu-

the end of the seventeenth century, Spinoza's association with materialism was especially based on the identification of his philosophy with the critique of religion, in the form of either atheism or pantheism. This identification became central for some of his eminent readers such as Pierre Bayle, Denis Diderot, and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, as well as in the whole quarrel of pantheism. It seems that this critique of religion, which was so central, is nowadays relatively secondary amongst scholars in their analysis of Spinoza's materialism. Since Louis Althusser's *Lire le Capital*, from 1965, and Antonio Negri's *Savage Anomaly*, from 1981 — which mobilized Spinoza within Marxist perspectives in order to offer a non-Hegelian reading of Marx —, the interest in Spinozist thought has nonetheless continued, as its adoption by authors such as Étienne Balibar or Frédéric Lordon demonstrates. These uses are far from being able to be unified, but what Althusser and Negri still have in common is that they seek to establish a link between Marxist criticism, in a political perspective, and Spinozist ontology.⁵ These uses are still important enough today for us to have dedicated a whole part of this volume to them and for a number of contributions to return, for example, to the importance, from a materialist perspective, of the concepts of 'immanence', 'multitude', and 'transindividual' in Spinoza's philosophy, as we will discuss later in the introduction. Here too, the post-Marxist field does not exhaust the question of the materialist legacy of Spinoza, and renewed references to Spinoza are also to be found in neo-materialist authors such as Jane Bennett,⁶ who see in it a possible critique of an overly anthropocentric Marxist materialism through the notion of 'conatus' which applies to all beings and allows us to think of a non-inert matter.

The selective thematic focus of this volume reflects the fact that materialism cannot and should not be reduced to a single definition

lar pp. 211–15. See also André Tosel, *Du matérialisme, de Spinoza* (Paris: Kimé, 1994); Dimitris Vardoulakis, *Spinoza, the Epicurean — Authority and Utility in Materialism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). Pascal Sévérac also returns to this point in his contribution to this volume and, more broadly, in his book *Qu'y a-t-il de matérialiste chez Spinoza?* (Paris: H Diffusion, 2020).

5 Florence Hulak analyses the difference between what she calls Althusser's structuralist and Negri's subjective Spinozism (cf. 'Spinoza après Marx, ou le problème de l'ontologie marxienne', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 56.4 (2007), pp. 483–98).

6 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. x.

and theme. The fact that materialism has often — depending on the relevant period and its dominant schools of thought — been reduced to one thesis such as mechanism, fatalism (as discussed in [Ayşe Yuva's contribution](#)), or, in the Marxist variant, economism, is a problem in itself. These variegated reductions alert us to the fact that materialism needs to be approached in a non-reductionist way, or that such reductions must, in the final analysis, be explained in terms of their theoretical reasoning, practical goals, or historical basis. Materialism cannot be reduced to one single factor, scale, or explanatory model, whether it be atoms or the relations of production.⁷ Many contributions in this volume (such as those by [Chiara Bottici](#), [Marianna Poyares](#), [Émilie Filion-Donato](#), [Christoph Holzhey](#), and [Wolf](#)) acknowledge and develop this necessarily pluralistic perspective.

Therefore, as a collective endeavour, this volume pursues the opening up of materialism towards a critical and non-reductionist form. This is not only a question of saying that there are a plurality of materialisms which are sometimes in competition, as was already the case in the nineteenth century between the scientist and Marxist materialist positions. Rather, the plurality of materialist approaches reflects the diversity of matter itself and of its conceptions, as well as the plurality of the political problems it raises. These problems are just as diverse as they are connected, for example through reflections on women's bodies, labour conditions, or the historical context of a theory. Not wanting to reduce these pluralities to a unity and to stress their historical, geographical and concrete situatedness, we chose to principally use the term 'materialities'.

7 Methodologically speaking, Althusser's concept of 'overdetermination' was useful to us. With it, he does not mean the reduction of all planes of reality other than economic reality to a pure phenomenon or reflection: on the contrary, he means to oppose the reduction of the dynamics of reality to a single simple contradiction, as the simplified Hegelianism of certain variants of Marxism might suggest. Cf. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), p. 101 and subsequent pages. He therefore opposes the 'mechanist-fatalist temptation in the history of nineteenth-century Marxism' (ibid., p. 105). He refers to Engels on this point and quotes the letter to Josef Bloch of 21 September 1890, to conclude with 'the accumulation of effective determinations [...] on the ultimate determination by the economic' (ibid., p. 113), which is why he adopts the term 'overdetermination'.

AGENCY AND ACTIVITY

Materialism in this volume is fundamentally linked to the idea that matter is not inert but acts upon, and therefore changes, itself and its surroundings. However, the definition of both matter and activity cannot be set once and for all.

For a long time, materialist authors were accused of conceiving of human agency as entirely determined by material causes. According to the opponents of modern materialism, this determinism did not make it possible to fundamentally distinguish human agency from the movements of inanimate bodies, since both would be subjected, according to this paradigm, to the same physical laws. Marx, in turn, added a layer of complexity, stressing the primacy of the relations of production, which eventually gave rise to the accusation of economic fatalism. The question of whether human existence is doomed to determinism or even fatalism plagued materialism throughout history. [Cornelia Möser's](#) and [Poyares's](#) contributions challenge this classic problem by showing that determinism does not imply fatalism, which is understood as an extreme form of the submission of human activity to necessity, or even to destiny. In this way, it is precisely by pluralizing the modes of determination that materialism counters fatalism. In particular, in recent years, factors other than socioeconomic ones became central to materialist analysis through the understanding of the body. [Catherine Perret's](#) contribution to this volume, for example, proposes a way out of this apparent fatalism by suggesting a reconceptualization of social bonds beyond the logic of value. She addresses a certain tradition of critical theory that reifies what it tried to criticize and that as such ended up commodifying social bonds. This tradition, according to her, has overlooked that within the organization of labour, human bodies are not simply 'automatons', but through their techniques, always keep an inventive quality.

This is not the only way out of fatalism proposed in the volume. Stefano Visentin's, Ericka Itokazu's, and Holzhey's contributions reflect on the relationship between freedom, contingency, and necessity at the crossroads of politics and (meta)physics. By stressing the radical determinism of God's power in Spinoza's philosophy, [Visentin](#) underscores that it does not preclude political freedom, whereas [Itokazu](#)

argues that such an argument does not suppress the experience of contingency in human life. Holzhey's contribution, in turn, challenges the distinction between determinism and fatalism. But he does not question the existence of a contingency which, according to him, lies at the point of transition between the realms of physics and action: political action is not founded on any ontology.

The question of fatalism and determinism introduces a reflection on the way human bodies act. This is an eminently political question which several contributions in this volume are engaged with. That is, they take on the task of redefining our understanding of human bodies and of matter in general, challenging our traditional view of them as non-inerts. In other words, bodies are not, according to these contributions, only passive receivers of movement coming from an external cause (which would possibly be spiritual), but have within themselves a principle of movement understood as 'force' or 'energy'. Following this problem, Bottici, who also re-reads Spinoza, proposes that women's bodies cannot be thought of as objects that are given once and for all — a claim which echoes Judith Butler's understanding of matter and the body⁸ — and should rather be thought of as processes. She argues that distinct conceptions of gendered bodies can structure the socio-political reality differently.

This idea of 'processuality' and the non-inert nature of bodies leads to a rethinking of individuality, as well as to the very division between activity and passivity. Hence the reference in Filion-Donato's and Bottici's contributions to Gilbert Simondon's concept of 'trans-individuality',⁹ according to which an individual, in the broad sense, that is, a person, but also an object and a collectivity, does not exist as such outside of its encounters with other individuals. Here, again, this materialist conception is often inspired by Spinoza — Étienne Balibar

8 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge Classics (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 7: 'In both the Latin and the Greek, matter (*materia* and *hyle*) is neither a simple, brute positivity or referent nor a blank surface or slate awaiting an external signification, but is always in some sense temporalized. This is true for Marx as well, when "matter" is understood as a principle of trans-formation, presuming and inducing a future. The matrix is an originating and formative principle which inaugurates and informs a development of some organism or object. Hence, for Aristotle, "matter is potentiality [*dynameos*], form actuality".'

9 Gilbert Simondon, *L'Individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (Paris: PUF, 1964), p. 31.

being one of the most prominent proponents of such an argument.¹⁰ Accordingly, ‘transindividual’ desires and passions, rather than individuals, are the fundamental methodological elements to understand social relations.¹¹ In this vein, **Mariana Gainza**’s contribution to this volume formulates a critique of the misuse of Spinoza’s theory of the passions¹² and warns against the dangers of aligning Spinozist ethics with neoliberal imperatives and its submission to ‘desires’.

However, while this transindividuality goes far beyond the sphere of the human, it highlights, more fundamentally, the political implications of relating human agency to the activity of matter. On this point, one can indeed observe a debate in the volume between the positions presented by the contributions of Möser and Poyares, on the one hand, and Filion-Donato’s contribution, on the other.

The conception of social life as intra-active and co-constitutive is elaborated in the New Materialist viewpoints of the kind found in **Filion-Donato’s contribution**. It can be said that while Marx underscored, by means of his materialist conception of history, that nature is active, insofar as it changes and is changed through human action, the New Materialists have insisted, through their focus on ‘actants’, on a conception of activity independent of human action.¹³

However, this broadening of the concept of ‘activity’, as **Möser** puts it, can blur the distinction between human agency and the ‘efficiency of things’. As she writes, ‘a substance does not choose to impact its environment the way a human can choose to go on strike’. Rethinking the activity of things, of matter, is not enough to challenge the organization of the world where women are dominated. **Poyares** via Susanne Lettow also warns us against the danger of transferring agency onto ‘anonymous, meta-historical forces like matter or life.’¹⁴ She re-

10 Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza politique. Le Transindividuel* (Paris: PUF, 2018), p. 199.

11 Following Frédéric Lordon, *Capitalisme, désir et servitude. Marx et Spinoza* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2010), Marx’s analysis of domination under a capitalist mode of production can be supplemented with a Spinozist theory of passions, which can prove to be a way out of the economic fatalism alluded to above.

12 Lordon, *Capitalisme, Désir et Servitude*, p. 10.

13 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

14 Susanne Lettow, ‘Turning the Turn: New Materialism, Historical Materialism and Critical Theory’, *Thesis Eleven*, 140.1 (2017), pp. 106–21 (p. 111) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513616683853>>.

proaches some neo-materialist authors like Rosi Braidotti for assuming ‘ontological parity between the vitality of atoms in their exchange of electrons and the vitality of social interactions, equating them under generic descriptions such as “agential assemblages”’: for her, this may lead to the assertion that power relations and physical forces are ‘ontologically analogous’.

Responding to this objection, *Filion-Donato* shows that these critiques are not entirely justified. In fact, it would be too hasty to say that New Materialism equates non-humans to humans in terms of agency. Though some New Materialists indeed attempt to widen the notion of the subject, it is essential to remember that not all argue that non-humans acquire subjectivity or agency — which is why they are called ‘actants’ and not ‘agents’.¹⁵ New Materialists would simply invite us to take the potency and effects of matter and objects upon humans seriously.

The notions of ‘actants’ and ‘agents’ highlight the existence of multiple scales of action and determination relevant for politics. It is not new that the scale of the state and that of the nation are judged insufficient, even mystifying, for materialist criticism. This can be shown through a broad comparison of different contributions to this volume. For example, *Elena Vogman*, analysing Nikolai Y. Marr’s theory of language, proposes to go beyond the ‘national’ scale of language in favour of an analysis of social and class strata. In a different fashion, *Bottici* and *Demirović* criticize an idea of political action conceived through the sole macro-scale of the state. But, while *Bottici* suggests not to wait for the state’s recognition, *Demirović* instead proposes not to wait for the state to pursue the common interest or the ability to exercise a common political goal. *Facundo Vega*, in his contribution, criticizes Ernesto Laclau for not appropriately considering the importance of the action of the ‘many’ and for (over)emphasizing, instead, the role of the

15 Latour writes in *Reassembling the Social* that ‘ANT is not the empty claim that objects do things “instead” of human actors: it simply says that no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of a better term, we would call *non-humans*’ (p. 72; emphasis in the original). He therefore prefers the term ‘actant’ to speak of the action or affordances of ‘non-humans’ and ‘actor’ when speaking specifically of human actants. Bennett also speaks of actants: ‘an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman’ (*Vibrant Matter*, p. 8).

leader's body, which unifies popular will, in the beginning of a process of emancipation. In Vega's view, this would restrain Laclau's previous materialist project.

Finally, this question of the scales of action allows us to grasp, in all its multiplicity and equivocality, the conventional materialist idea of an action of the 'milieu'. Marlon Miguel's contribution addresses the problem of the local scale of action through the politicization of education. He analyses the social re-education work with young delinquents undertaken by the Soviet pedagogue Anton Makarenko. Rather than a directive relationship between master and student, Miguel conceives of pedagogy as a materialist emancipative and local process entirely structured and mediated by a collectively constructed milieu.

NON-REDUCTIONIST MATERIALIST EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE MULTIPLICITY OF CAUSES

The claim that no scale of activity can be reduced to another brings us to the consideration of a political gesture that is central to the present volume: a non-reductionist definition of materialism. The critique of reductionist materialism takes different forms in this volume, but what they have in common is the affirmation that the intelligibility of social existence and political life cannot be subordinated to an underlying given reality, be it in the form of a more fundamental level of existence or an ultimate purpose.

We find this perspective synthesized in Balibar's recovery of the idea of a 'materialism without matter', introduced in 1993 in his text *Marx's Philosophy*. By borrowing the concept from Friedrich H. Jacobi, Balibar identifies a kind of materialism in Marx that 'has nothing to do with a reference to matter'.¹⁶ This expression, which is extensively analysed by Poyares (and referred to by Bernardo Bianchi), is implicitly present throughout the entire volume. In general, we argue

16 Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 23. His conceptualization is based on Marx's opening thesis on Feuerbach, and, therefore, on the distinction regarding the 'old materialism' from Marx's own attempt to redefine the concept of materialism: 'the chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things, reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively'. See Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in *MECW [Marx & Engels Collected Works, see abbreviations]*, v (1976), pp. 3–5 (p. 3).

that Marx's gesture has been much overlooked in the Marxist and even post-Marxist traditions, which have, in turn, given rise to forms of dogmatism responsible for reintroducing stadialist ideologies and teleology in socio-political analysis.¹⁷ By contrast, Balibar's theoretical insights represent a red thread in this volume uniting analyses concerned with both the broader contemporary renewal of Marxist debate, as well as the reappraisal of the meaning of materialism in this tradition, which is addressed by the contributions from **Vittorio Morfino**, **Poyares**, **Wolf**, and **Vega**. In addition, the implicit or explicit engagement with the challenge of stadialist conceptions in the Marxist tradition is addressed by **Miguel**, **Perret**, **Pascal Sévérac**, and **Vogman**. Both dimensions are articulated in **Bianchi's** contribution, as he proposes to identify the development, in Marx, of a non-reductionist kind of materialism that refuses every form of stadialism, especially in view of the relationship between knowledge and political action.

Through its reference to practice, Marx's materialism entails the refusal of any unidirectional conception regarding the relationship between nature and human existence:¹⁸ here matter is not a 'first

17 In our account, stadialist arguments amount to the parallel between the evolution of societies and that of individuals, whereby they progress through identical stages organized according to a linear upward movement, from an original infantile stage of indolence to the 'mature' stage of action and self-determination. In the history of Marxism, stadialist arguments were favoured in the Second International, largely due to Georgi V. Plekhanov, who argued that one must first fight for a bourgeois revolution so that a socialist revolution can take place in a further moment. After the influence of Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, published in 1938, this perspective became a dogma of Marxism-Leninism. In this perspective, all peoples must invariably go through five successive and linearly organized modes of production: primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. Stadialism has been largely criticized for imposing a model brought from the outside and for overlooking local circumstances, as well as for justifying domination on the basis of the claim of a 'lower', and therefore deficient, stage of evolution. **Sévérac's contribution** to this volume invites us to criticize, however, the very metaphor at the basis of stadialist arguments: the difference between the child and the adult. In taking precautions against the precocization of childhood as an absolute value, as if rational and emotional development had no value, Sévérac nevertheless proposes a positive interpretation of it, insofar as the child is a being that challenges us to reflect upon the ways their aptitudes can be increased (a task for which adulthood does not offer a model).

18 Ludwig Feuerbach's materialism instead implied a sort of idealism, insofar as it restated a series of dichotomies between passivity and activity, representation and subjectivity, and essence and existence. One can, therefore, understand Gérard Bensussan's argument of describing Feuerbachian philosophy as a 'translational thought'. See Gérard Bensussan, 'Feuerbach et le "Secret" de Spinoza', in *Spinoza au XIXe siècle*, ed. by André Tosel, Pierre-François Moreau, and Jean Salem (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne,

nature' that is employed as an *arche*. Still, it is also not a layer of reality subordinated to external principles — this argument echoes Visentin's usage of the Spinozist expression '*non defuit materia*'. Even though Marx, following Hobbes, states in the *Holy Family* that 'matter is the substratum of all changes going on in the world',¹⁹ this understanding needs to be complemented by his other considerations, such as those expressed in the 'Theses on Feuerbach', stating that matter cannot be reduced to object or to subject; it cannot exist outside of processes in which it is modified and modifies things. For this very reason, Marx's philosophy entails a non-reductionist approach to materialism, which is to be understood as a non-contemplative materialism, leading to a 'materialist conception of history'.

Our understanding of a non-reductionist definition of materialism concerns not only a refusal of unidirectional explanations about the relationship between nature and human existence, but also the rejection of any explanation in terms of linear models of causality. In the sixth thesis *ad* Feuerbach, Marx claims: 'but the essence of man [...] is the *ensemble of the social relations*'.²⁰ This gesture points to a new direction concerning materialism, whereby the notion of the human is to be defined through practice, among which one can include 'tool-making',²¹ as well as all human activity, which should be analysed at the collective scale rather than on the individual one. Both Perret and Vogman highlight this shift in their contributions. According to this view, toolmaking — and, more broadly, all transformation of nature by human action — should not be regarded as the outcome of the emergence of a highly developed brain, just as human activity is not the effect of the emergence of *homo sapiens*, but its cause. Socialized activity in the world is the basis of the process of 'hominization' — a thesis that resonates throughout this volume. In this thesis we can

2007), pp. 111–23 (p. 119) <<https://doi.org/10.4000/books.psorbonne.158>>. By this he meant that Feuerbach always intended to 'turn the predicate into the subject and thus as a subject into object and principle [...] in this way, we have the uncoiled, pure, and untarnished truth'. See Ludwig Feuerbach, 'Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy', in *The Fiery Brook* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 153–73 (p. 154). Marx's materialism is not translational just as it is not reductionist.

19 Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism*, in *MECW*, IV (1975), pp. 3–211 (p. 129).

20 Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', p. 4; emphasis added.

21 Karl Marx, *Capital*, 3 vols (London: Penguin, 1976), I, trans. by Ben Fowkes, p. 286.

observe yet another strong Spinozist characteristic: just as humanity should not be understood as prior to social action, the mind is not prior to the affects of the body.²² In Spinoza, the process of singularization is inseparable from a process of composition and decomposition with other bodies, which is the basis of an understanding of history *sub durationis* and not under the perspective of time — an idea developed in Itokazu’s contribution to this volume, where, in opposition to the concept of time, she associates ‘duration’ to singularization, therefore proposing a positive conception of finitude.

Therefore, our political understanding of materialism is inseparable from two features: a theory of causality that underscores the multiplicity of factors, and the refusal of any idea of origin or foundation.²³ While the latter feature is clearly posited by Althusser’s writings from the 1980s, he developed the former in the 1960s.²⁴ In *The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter*, Althusser introduces the concept of ‘taking hold’ (*prise*), which is a corollary of the concept of ‘encounter’. ‘Taking hold’ here refers to the process of individuation (autonomization): to the mayonnaise that takes hold when it emulsifies or a SARS-CoV-2 which, coming from a different species such as a bat, infects and takes hold in a human body. This critique of the foundation of the late Althusser can be connected to his writings concerning ‘structural causality’, understood in opposition to linear causality, from

22 According to Spinoza, ‘the Mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the Body’. See *Ethics* II, 23; CWS I, p. 468. This means that the mind is the ensemble of ideas stemming from the fortuitous encounters of one’s body with external things, by means of which it is constantly affecting and being affected. See *Ethics* II, 28; CWS I, p. 470. The fact that these affections are not accidents external to us, but constitutive of our own bodies (and therefore of ourselves) has led Lorenzo Vinciguerra to the development of the concept of ‘field of traceability’. See his *Spinoza et le signe. La Genèse de l’imagination* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), p. 118.

23 As Althusser asserts, ‘the whole that results from the “taking hold” of the “encounter” does not precede the “taking-hold” of its elements, but follows it; for this reason, it might not have “taken hold”, and, a *fortiori*, “the encounter might not have taken place”’. See Louis Althusser, ‘The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter’, in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–87*, ed. by François Matheron and Oliver Corpet, trans. by Geoffrey M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 163–207 (p. 197).

24 Although complementary, these two moments can be identified with two moments in the work of Althusser, as Morfino discusses in this volume. Morfino nevertheless identifies in the texts of the 1980s an eschatological tendency which is not to be confused with the materialist tendency, as ‘it affirms communism as simple *parousia* to-come’.

the 1960s.²⁵ An effect is not merely assignable to a cause, as existing in itself, but to a cause *insofar as it is intertwined with other relations* that constitute the structure in which it is situated. In the political field, this problem brings Vega to reflect on Laclau's post-foundational definition of politics. According to him, Laclau remains too fascinated by 'the extraordinary', itself based on the Heideggerian ontological concept of 'political difference'. Instead, Vega rejects a theory that would renew the mythical origins of emancipation and proposes to rethink the ordinary irruption of the 'many' in politics. This conception of the political is no longer conceived as a 'superstructure' but as an 'ontology of the social'. This perspective resonates with Mauricio Rocha's contribution. By underscoring the importance of Deleuze's discovery in the late 1960s of 'expression' as a decisive concept in Spinoza's philosophy, Rocha demonstrates how this finding allows Deleuze to develop a non-hierarchical conception of reality, which ultimately leads to the idea of 'plane of immanence' and to the valorization of politics in his work.

All in all, 'materialism without matter' does not mean the refusal of matter. It entails the rejection of a foundational ontology that would inevitably exhaust other ontological levels, including that of the political, that is, no level of reality can be totally reduced to another. In this vein, 'materialism without matter' implies an anti-reductionist analysis of the political, of the discourses, and even of philosophical activity.

MATERIALISM AND PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

This volume proposes that materialism should be understood in a broader sense to include discourse which, although incorporeal, relates to matter and acts upon bodies. A number of contributions to the volume (such as those from Bianchi, Demirović, Gainza, Perret, Sévérac, Wolf, and Yuva) address this relationship between materialism and the criticism, even subversion, of 'ideology', which is a concept that must also be problematized.

25 See Louis Althusser, 'On Genesis', in *History and Imperialism: Writings, 1963–1986*, ed. and trans. by Geoffrey M. Goshgarian (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), pp. 33–36 (p. 34). As an example, Althusser refers to the physical concept of 'causality of a field', which we propose to think in connection with Vinciguerra's concept of 'field of traceability' (see note number 22 above).

In 1970, Althusser rehabilitated the question of ‘ideology’ by indicating its centrality to political thought. According to the philosopher, if ideology represents an imaginary relation between individuals it nevertheless has a ‘material existence.’²⁶ Ideology materializes itself in theories, apparatuses, and practices that can and should be the object of analysis. Althusser’s gesture to read Marx against Marx and to ‘open him up’ was taken over by contemporary authors. Balibar, for example, in a text about both Althusser and Marx, characterizes the latter’s materialism not as theoretical content or method but through ‘the *fact* that Marx inscribed in theory itself the *limits*, and thus the *conditions*, imposed on its historical efficiency by the fact that theory consist of “ideas”.’²⁷ Balibar points towards the crucial idea of a ‘finite theory’ as developed in this volume by **Wolf’s contribution**.

According to Michel Foucault, the Althusserian project concerning the question of ‘ideology’ remained too dematerialized, abstract, and intellectual, too ‘state-centred.’²⁸ But despite his criticisms, it is precisely Foucault who, in a certain sense, developed an analysis of the materialities that constitute and modulate subjectivity. Furthermore, in *The Order of Discourse* he also introduced the idea of an ‘incorporeal materialism’ in order to rethink the notion of ‘event.’²⁹ Foucault’s thesis is that there is a materiality of discourse: while it is certainly a materiality very different from that of bodies and things, he nevertheless claimed that ‘discursive events’ take effect on the material level. The relation of things and discourses are not to be thought according to a mechanical causality nor an ideal necessity; instead, the philosopher

26 Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)’, in *Lenin and Philosophy’ and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 127–86.

27 Étienne Balibar, ‘Althusser’s Object’, trans. by Margaret Cohen and Bruce Robbins, *Social Text*, 39 (Summer 1994), pp. 157–88 (p. 177; emphasis in the original); French original as ‘L’Objet Althusser’, in *Politique et philosophie dans l’œuvre de Louis Althusser*, ed. by Sylvain Lazarus (Paris: PUF, 1993), pp. 81–116 (p. 110).

28 Pierre Macherey clearly shows the importance of this critique of Foucault: the ‘power’, the ‘energy’ of the ideology is so efficient because ‘it is not diffused from a unique centre that would be the State’ (Pierre Macherey and Orazio Irrera, ‘Michel Foucault et les critiques de l’idéologie. Dialogue avec Pierre Macherey’, *Methodos. Savoir et textes*, 16 (2016) <<https://doi.org/10.4000/methodos.4667>>.

29 Michel Foucault, ‘The Order of Discourse: Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France, given December 2, 1970’, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. by Robert Young (London, Routledge, 1981), pp. 51–78 (p. 69).

proposes to analyse the ‘relation, the coexistence, the dispersion, the overlapping, the accumulation, and the selection of material elements.’³⁰ Although the discursive order is characterized by hazardous, aleatory, contingent, and discontinuous events, they can all still be retraced and analysed.³¹ The idea of ‘materialities’ in the plural, which is utilized by many contributions to this volume, emphasizes the importance of resisting the temptation of reductionism in all its forms. It shows the necessity of philosophically taking into account ‘**worlds feelings, of practices, organizations, institutions, and even ideas**’, as Wolf remarks in his contribution.

In this sense, philosophical analysis should be enriched by materials that come from other disciplines, such as those obtained through ethnographic work. In this way it can enlarge its discursive field, avoiding some risks contained in pure abstraction, while at the same time employing critical tools that can de-naturalize or de-essentialize the immediacy of those same materials.³² The study of materiality and the materialist approach do not imply giving up on philosophy, but it certainly means broadening the task of philosophy in order to reconsider

30 Ibid.

31 The idea of ‘incorporeality’ is inspired by Foucault’s readings of the Stoic philosophers. It is very present also in the nearly contemporaneous book from Deleuze entitled *Logic of Sense*. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze (with Guattari) takes over the notion and provides very intelligible examples of it. The enunciative act pronounced by a judge that transforms the accused into the guilty is described as an incorporeal attribute, though decisive for the body of the individual (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 81). Lorenzo Vinciguerra’s re-reading of Spinoza and the problem of the sign also further develops the idea of a semiotic materialism or, in his words, of a ‘sémiophysics’ (*Spinoza et le signe*, p. 136). Finally, one can also mention the neologism ‘*motérialisme*’ (the materiality of the word), invented some years later, in 1975, by Jacques Lacan (‘Conférence à Genève sur le symptôme’, texte établi par Jacques-Allain Miller, *La Cause du Désir*, 95 (2017), pp. 7–24 <<https://doi.org/10.3917/lcdd.095.0007>>).

32 Cf. Althusser, *For Marx*: ‘Others, of more scientific bent, proclaimed the “end of philosophy” in the manner of certain positivistic formulations in *The German Ideology*, in which it is no longer the proletariat or revolutionary action which take in charge the realization and thereby the death of philosophy, but science pure and simple: does not Marx call on us to stop philosophizing, that is, stop developing ideological reveries so that we can move on to the study of reality itself?’ (p. 28) and ‘*The German Ideology* sanctions this confusion as it reduces philosophy, as we have noted, to a faint shadow of science, if not to the empty generality of positivism. This practical consequence is one of the keys to the remarkable history of Marxist philosophy, from its origins to the present day’ (pp. 33–34).

the historical and, in every sense of the word, the material situatedness of any philosophical problem.

Even though this volume adopts a rather contemporary perspective, it nonetheless begins with a reflection on the return to Spinoza, as well as the return to other past materialist movements — Althusser's work, for example, belongs to a historical moment that is no longer entirely ours. While the understanding of the historical, social moment to which philosophical works belong is a part of the materialist project, their re-actualization is equally important — an approach which is exemplified in [Bottici's contribution](#) to this volume and its actualization of an anarchist tradition in feminist theory. This approach supposes a philosophical reading of past texts which, without being teleologically oriented towards our time, actualizes relevant potentialities contained in 'thinking' the present, while helping to reveal radical discontinuities in the ways of posing a problem in contemporary or past terms — as we see, for example, in [Miguel's](#), [Vogman's](#), and [Yuva's](#) contributions. While their efforts to analyse the materialisms of the Soviet era, or even older materialisms from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, may seem outdated, they offer, in fact, contemporary reflections on how to redefine the role and nature of the 'milieu' in education, of the gesture in human exchange, work, and language, or of ideology in the history of materialism.

What is ultimately at stake is the fact that old theories, whether philosophical or not, should not automatically be considered outdated simply because they do not belong to our historical moment. On the one hand, the historical horizon of some past authors is still, to some extent, ours; on the other hand, the identification of new practical problems leads to the discovery of original theoretical territories which, even if they constitute something 'new', may still nevertheless be located in the past. Materialism, whether it arises from the philosophers who have claimed this label or the kinds of methods we discuss in this volume, does not imply a form of theoretical 'presentism' postulating that only contemporary theories can help us in the urgency of rethinking the present.

The history of materialism is full of controversies which involve both the materialist authors themselves as well as the insufficiently emancipatory dimension of certain so-called materialist theories and

their uses. Rather than seeking to provide the final word, this volume aims at giving expression to the tensions and irresolvable polemics of the complex materialist discursive field. As such, we have aimed, above all, to show the multiplicity of paths, tools, and strategies that materialism both in the past and in the present offers to critically rethink political activity.

Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and Ayşe Yuva, 'From 'Materialism' towards 'Materialities'', in *Materialism and Politics*, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and Ayşe Yuva, Cultural Inquiry, 20 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 1–18 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-20_000>

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