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## Materialism and Capitalism Today Zoo-aesthetics and a Critique of the Social Bond after Marcel Mauss and André Leroi-Gourhan

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**ABSTRACT:** This chapter identifies a materiality of social bonds that is not reducible to the logic of exchange value between alienated subjects. It analyses different forms of relationship of the human body to the milieu, following Marcel Mauss's techniques of the body and André Leroi-Gourhan's definitions of evolution. The producing body, it is argued, does more than only embody norms in a process of subjectivation. The externalization of the body in gestures cannot be reduced, therefore, to the evolutionary level that produces ethnic and social norms.

**KEYWORDS:** embodiment; individuation; subjectivation; human evolution; gesture; tools; social norms; speech; capitalism; technics; materialism; Mauss, Marcel; Leroi-Gourhan, André

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# Materialism and Capitalism Today

Zoo-aesthetics and a Critique of the Social Bond after  
Marcel Mauss and André Leroi-Gourhan

CATHERINE PERRET

## INTRODUCTION

The question posed by the editors of this collective volume is one of the most pertinent questions of today: ‘What is the relevance of materialism for thinking the political?’ In spite of the scientific, philosophical, and cultural corpus at our disposal today, which should be able to reorient the catastrophic process set out by post-industrial capitalism (the tragedy of migration, the ecological disaster, growing inequalities, the rise of populisms, and the return to authoritarian politics), our efforts to renew modern criticism seem destined to remain helpless. Materialism, which I define as the analysis of the determination of social relations by the relations of production, has been largely incorporated and exploited by the contemporary capitalist rationale.

This rationale has extended the reign of the commodity to knowledge on the one hand, and to *psychè* on the other. Today we witness the production and commodification of new subjectivities stemming from consumer practices: the design of identities, the marketing of new forms of experience, and the development of what I call the *genetic*

*paradigm*<sup>1</sup> that has brought the reproduction of the species back into the realm of the normative. These new forms of production transform social bonds into goods, and goods into social bonds. Current capitalism has succeeded at what nineteenth-century determinism did not dare to imagine.

Faced with this situation, it seems necessary to re-evaluate the criticism addressed to the analysis of value, i.e. how this value is embodied.<sup>2</sup> This critical position argues, on the one hand, that social subjects are defined both by their production and by their alienation from this production, and, on the other hand, that the bonds between subjects are realized through the exchange of values. Critical theories of value, which begin with the concepts of fetishism and alienation, are ultimately based on psychology, and have the goal of explaining the paradoxical materiality of goods, i.e. their uncanny ‘spirituality’. These theories are consistent with the presuppositions of so-called ‘neoliberalism’ whether they are based on behaviourism or psychoanalysis.<sup>3</sup> By this I mean that, because critical theories of value think that social bonds are found in the exchange that takes place between subjects, they are easily subordinated to the neo-liberal, capitalistic idea that subjects are qualified as such by what they produce. The main issue with these theories comes from the fact that they function as mirrors of the status quo, and hence they lack potency.

For this reason, I think it is useful to return to the attempts made in the middle of the twentieth century to identify a materiality of social bonds that is not reducible to the logic of value or to what has been called ‘the symbolic exchange’.<sup>4</sup> These alternative theories come

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1 In French, I call this ‘*le tout-génétique*’.

2 See Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978); *Simulacres et Simulation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981); as well as Jean-Joseph Goux, *Frivolité de la valeur* (Paris: Blusson, 2000).

3 The term ‘neoliberal’ has many flaws, including suggesting that capitalism has changed in nature by changing its form. However, it has the advantage of making it clear that it is becoming impossible to discern the implications of accumulation and those of the individual’s subjection to the norms supposed to guarantee his or her autonomy.

4 We need to reassess the form of critique that has been dominant until now, which is concerned with the analysis of value and the phenomena of its embodiment. Based upon the analyses of the Frankfurt School since the 1930s as well as the theories of libidinal economy and even most of today’s criticisms of neo-capitalism, this critique builds upon the concepts of alienation of the subject and commodity fetishism which are inherited from Marx and Freud. One should also note that in Marx and Freud

from anthropology. They focus on the notion of 'milieu' in order to disconnect this notion from the determinism that inspired it in the last decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

By combining the definition of the *human milieu* as a technical milieu with the distinction between individuation and subjectivation, I would like to propose a reflection on the materialities of the social bond. This bond is effectively embodied because it is symbolic, and because it indicates how alterity is a 'part' of everyone by dividing them. It takes bodily shape. For example, it takes shape in regimes of perception that condition the individual's ability to sense the governing norms of the society they belong to, and to bring them into play, for themselves and towards others, as rhythmical and formal values, in other words, as emotions and as living spaces. Then and only then does the individual experience social reality, and not as a constituent of that reality who is subjected to social order, but rather as an individual who feels, acts, and thinks, and who thus contributes to the renewal of the norms and codes that characterize the social bond.

I develop this argument alongside the work of Marcel Mauss and Leroi-Gourhan. It is indeed impossible to think of this question without one or the other, even if Leroi-Gourhan largely erased the traces of his doctoral advisor in his writings.

MARCEL MAUSS'S 'TECHNIQUES OF THE BODY':  
BODY-AS-MEDIUM AND THE TECHNICAL MILIEU

I am less interested, for the purposes of this chapter, in Mauss's famous essay on the gift than in his later text on the techniques of the body.<sup>6</sup>

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the concepts of 'alienation' and 'fetishism' were heuristic and critical. Parasitized and disabled since that time by the dominant positivistic philosophies, they have become explanatory tools used to 'describe (a supposed) reality', as if the subjects were qualified as such, as subjects, by their identification with the objects they produce and exchange, so that effectively the social bond is reduced to what Jean Baudrillard, under the term 'symbolic exchange', likened to death (cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1993)).

5 The notion of 'milieu' thus appears in opposition to the notion of 'environment'. This distinction has its origin in the works of ethnologist Jakob von Uexküll.

6 Marcel Mauss, 'Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques', *L'Année sociologique, nouvelle série*, 1 (1923-24), pp. 30-186; in English as 'Essay on the Gift: The Form and Sense of Exchange in Archaic Societies', in his *The Gift*, expanded edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). Marcel Mauss,

In this text, Mauss produces a theory of the close connection in the human species between ‘doing’ (or ‘making something’) and ‘forging bonds’ (or making social connections). He starts from the analysis of the corporal practices involved in industrial production, which were already dominant in 1936 through Taylorism. Mauss, who was a supporter of cooperative socialism, uses his essay to highlight the relationship between production and cooperation. He points out something that is generally neglected by capitalist reasoning, namely, what exceeds the object produced during the process of technical production: the creation and maintenance of a technical milieu which conditions its production. Mauss develops the thesis of Alfred Espinas,<sup>7</sup> who was the founder of the biology of technology, and conceptualises that *the human milieu is a technical milieu*.

However, Mauss extends the meaning of this proposition in two directions. On the one hand, humans, unlike other animals, do not adapt to their environment. They build it using techniques that ‘*prosthétize*’ their natural faculties and produce new bodies. In this sense, the human milieu is the technical milieu which uses the body as an instrument. On the other hand, because modern production techniques are divided and distributed between individuals, they require a different mode of transmission for procedures that train the body in order to be effective. This transmission both divides and assembles the bodies into an experience and a common practice — modern production techniques ‘assemble’ a common body from the various bodies at work which passes directly through the sensations of the individual bodies.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the cliché of automating bodies at work, Mauss shows that modern technical production reveals another body than the body-as-instrument or ‘object-body’, something he calls a ‘body-as-medium’

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‘Les Techniques du corps’, *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique*, 32 (1935), pp. 271–93; in English as ‘Techniques of the Body’, *Economy and Society*, 2.1 (1973), pp. 70–88.

7 Alfred Espinas, *Les Origines de la technologie*, Étude Sociologique (Paris: Alcan, 1897); English excerpts as ‘The Origins of Technology [excerpts]’, trans. by Catherine Schnoor, in *The Roots of Praxiology: French Action Theory from Bourdeau and Espinas to Present Days*, ed. by Victor Alexandre in coop. with Wojciech W. Gasparski (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 45–91.

8 Workers have to incorporate the entire process of the chain. They have to share the same rhythms to be able to co-ordinate their movements, and, at the same time, to feel each change in this shared rhythm. This co-operation between bodies, and between bodies and machines, requires very specialized techniques of the body.

— or body as ‘technical means’.<sup>9</sup> This body-as-medium transforms the material conditions of production into a living circuit of transmission, or technical milieu. It develops an autonomous life of its own that takes shape in bodies that ‘act together’ and communicate through shared sensations. Mauss thus proposes that the producing body, in the act of producing, is not only a quantifiable work force, but a living mediation that contributes to the survival of this technical human milieu.

I have drawn two hypotheses from Mauss’s ‘Techniques of the Body’. The first is that the social dimension of the production of value, which is housed in the subject, and the milieu’s dimension, which is found in the techniques of the body, are not identical. They coexist, yet are embodied differently. The first dimension is embodied in norms, and the second dimension is embodied in the forms of ‘affordances’<sup>10</sup> or ‘agentivities’ constituted by rhythms, gestures, common practices, or forms which enable cooperation. The body’s sensation at work — which is an idea I will develop further in the next paragraph — contributes to its productivity but it does not depend on this productivity.

The second hypothesis is that this sensation of the body at work conditions the possibility of working ‘together’. Sensation, Mauss writes, is a ‘cog-wheel’.<sup>11</sup> It is a binding agent. The materiality of these social bonds consists in the power of the sensation of constructing action in time by recording it as a rhythm, and of distributing action in space by inscribing it as a gesture. Sensation thus simultaneously establishes the individuation of each body as well as their capacity to cooperate.

As a result of these insights, it is possible to conceive of cooperation which, just like commodification, is a verification of the social bond, as not only dependent on the regulatory ideals shared by the producing subjects, i.e. on the process of subjectivation, but as also dependent on the individuation of this medium-body — this *body-as-means* — which, through its activity, continuously recreates the technical milieu.

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9 Mauss, ‘Techniques of the Body’, p. 75.

10 For the use of the term in a practical sense, see the works of Hubert Godard, as well as Carla Bottiglieri, ‘Soigner l’imaginaire du geste: pratiques somatiques du toucher et du mouvement’, *Chimères*, 78 (2012/13), pp. 113–28 <<https://doi.org/10.3917/chime.078.0113>>.

11 Mauss, ‘Techniques of the Body’, p. 85.

The originality of Mauss's thesis is to detach the body from its subjective existence and to consider the body as a direct product of its milieu. Thanks to this reversal of perspective, Mauss makes sensation the a-subjective interface between the biological and social realms, or between an individual's belonging to her milieu and her belonging to society. Mauss thus invites us to think about what remains — even in symbolic exchange — of the order of a kinaesthetic materiality, which is independent of the processes of subjectivation and the logic of value.<sup>12</sup>

*GESTURE AND SPEECH AFTER ANDRÉ LEROI-GOURHAN:  
RETHINKING EVOLUTION*

Following in Mauss's footsteps, Leroi-Gourhan sought to think of social bonding in terms of the interplay between 'milieu' and 'society'. Leroi-Gourhan, who was a prehistoric anthropologist in contrast to Mauss's background in sociology, translated the problematic of the 'milieu versus society' in terms of the differences between a species and an ethnic group. Like Mauss, he viewed the principle of individuation in the framework of sensation and its relation to perception. In his opinion, the power of human societies to continue to create their living milieu depends on this process of individuation.

Let us very briefly recall some basic principles of Leroi-Gourhan's thought. In the first place, he posits the thesis that the human species, contrary to what the vulgar evolutionist schema asserts, belongs to a different evolutionary process than primates. The development of humanity, Leroi-Gourhan explains, comes from the increase of their technical genius, which depends on their upright position and the way

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12 The editors of this volume have pointed out that Mauss's redefinitions and objections towards a more traditional Marxian conception of value are centrally important for the notion of materialism. Though I agree, discussing Mauss's complex relationship to Marxism is beyond the scope of this chapter. One must note, however, that Mauss was interested in the bodies of workers in action, and looked (thanks, in particular, to cinema) at the 'physio-socio-psychological assemblies' that production lines are. Indeed, Mauss does not, as most observers of his time did, see the effect of a giant mechanism spreading throughout society, but rather points out the tiny cogs of individual sensations that link the physiological, sociological, and psychological aspects of such systems. What fascinates him is the way in which each body in its own plurality matches the plurality of the others, each of which is a unique cog within the whole of the mobilized bodies.

in which this restructures the relation between the hand and the brain: orthostasis frees the hand from the locomotive function and the mouth from the feeding function. It hence releases the hand for gesture and the mouth for word/speech.

Leroi-Gourhan's second essential thesis is the distinction he makes regarding the exteriorization of the species-specific individual body through its techniques. On the one hand, the specific individual body is externalized through its techniques, which includes techniques of production and memorization. On the other hand, this specific individual body is externalized into the 'social body' that groups individuals together in ethnic groups, introduces the development of these ethnic groups, and provides these individuals with the memory they lack through education and learning. Leroi-Gourhan calls this second plane of evolution and externalization 'ethnic', and he notes that education ensures the reproduction of the social order by institutionalizing this reproductive order and the power structures that guarantee its legitimacy.

Therefore, there are distinct planes of evolution that have their own logic instead of a single evolutionary process. This includes, firstly, the species-specific evolution, which concerns the individual body and which depends on the relation between hand and brain. This is further concretized in the development of techniques; and secondly, the ethnic evolution that concerns human societies. This evolution is embodied in the modes which individuals, institutions, and norms are grouped under.<sup>13</sup> These planes of evolution are autonomous, which means that they can diverge; this possible divergence of the species-specific and the ethnic is one of the major questions discussed in *Le Geste et la Parole*.<sup>14</sup>

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13 The editors of this volume have asked if norms take on different planes for Mauss and for Leroi-Gourhan and if the ethical plane of Leroi-Gourhan is approximately the same as the social plane of Mauss. Though I find these questions interesting, again, a thorough elaboration would necessitate a whole article. What I can say here is that Leroi-Gourhan tried to eclipse the Maussian heritage in his work, even though the connections between them cannot be adequately deduced from their texts. I propose such a connection through a restitution of the link between their work, and it, therefore, is my own hypothesis.

14 André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Geste et la Parole*, 2 vols (Paris: Albin Michel, 1964–65), I: *Technique et Langage* (1964); II: *La mémoire et les Rythmes* (1965); in English as *Gesture and Speech*, trans. by Anna Bostock Berger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

In fact, the techno-economic evolution takes place between these two planes.<sup>15</sup> As capitalism develops, technical development is put at the service of the economic development of societies, i.e. of the for-profit economy. This third historical factor leads to the exploitation of technologies in favour of a normative rationality that homogenizes societies, globalizes cultural issues, and creates a kind of undifferentiated mega-ethnicity in which the need for individuation is forgotten.

For Leroi-Gourhan, the acceleration of techno-economic evolution in modern societies provokes the divergence between specific evolution and ethnic evolution, or the individual body and the social body. By producing new forms of experience and new identities, the techno-economic evolution makes us forget that the technical genius of humanity rests within the species-specific body of the individual. This is the body of one who, for the last 40,000 years, has ‘thought’ with her hand and who has developed her cognitive and symbolic faculties through the use of (1) her body, (2) her physical skills, and (3) the lived relation of this body to space and time. Throughout this time, the body has not changed: the hand, as the intersection between gesture and speech, remains the organ upon which the individuation of individuals depends. The hand is also the source of the capacity of the social body to adapt to the transformations of its environment and to create new milieus.

According to Leroi-Gourhan, the exploitation of the technical apparatus developed by homo sapiens’ specific body in favour of the interests of the economic organization of its social body runs the risk of a *gregarization* — a turning into a ‘herd behaviour’ — of the human species. With this risk there is not only the added risk of a technical loss of creativity, but, more broadly, also a loss of social inventiveness, as well as a decline in the power of humanity to emancipate itself by producing its own forms of life.<sup>16</sup>

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15 The term ‘techno-economy’ is an attempt to answer the question of the connection between capitalism and these two planes.

16 ‘The great problem of the world as it already exists calls for a solution: How shall this archaic mammal, with its archaic needs that have been the driving force of its ascent, continue to push its rock up the hillside if one day it is left with only the image of its reality? At no time in its development has this species yet had to break away from itself since the days of the *Australanthrope*. Homo sapiens lived his interminable adventure concretely; today the human is on the point of exhausting the resources of the planet,

When seen from this perspective, the criticism of neo-capitalism reaches another level, because it advances beyond a question of the human in society and the subject that produces values and towards the question of the human in its environment. Here it is not enough to denounce the exploitation of the worker's labour force, because it is necessary to think of the nature of the body at work: the body-as-medium of Mauss and the specific body of Leroi-Gourhan. The body must be thought of as existing in a milieu, and as a body involved as much in the production of material goods, raw materials, equipment, and objects as in the production of intangible goods, knowledge, know-how, and services. We need a new way of thinking about the body.

#### CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A ZOO-AESTHETICS

Yet, according to Leroi-Gourhan, a lock can maintain the development of humanity on the horizon of its species-specific body. This lock is a third plane of evolution that Leroi-Gourhan calls the aesthetic plane. This third evolutionary plane re-inscribes ethnic evolution in the body of specific humans. This plane is based on perception and on the power of human perception to re-incorporate the norms and values of the society of which the individual is a member. It is based on her power to reshape or relive these norms and values as incarnated emotions and as lived spaces, as rhythmic, sensitive, and formal values. This power of perception, which, for Leroi-Gourhan, reinstates humanity in its species condition, meaning its animal condition, ensures the plasticity of social connections and their transformation through the transformation of rhythms, gestures, and figures. Leroi-Gourhan thus develops a 'zoo-aesthetics', which I will, to conclude, discuss in order to show how we can critically enquire into alienation beyond the traditional theory of value.

Leroi-Gourhan writes:

Can we see the perception and creation of rhythmic symbols as something deeply rooted in the animal world which — on

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and already the myth of human transplantation into space has sprung up. But there can be no going back over the ground already covered. We can dream that when arriving on a distant star, the human will encounter Pithecanthropus and the southern elephant but will not revert to flint knapping' (Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, p. 407).

emergence at the human level — displays the same characteristics as technics and language? To put it differently, since the technical function in human beings exteriorizes itself in portable tools and since the perceived object too is exteriorized in a verbal symbol, can we assume that movement in all its forms — visual, auditive, and motor — was also ‘freed’ and entered upon the same evolutionary cycle?<sup>17</sup>

This quotation lays the foundation of Leroi-Gourhan’s thesis: perception, far from anticipating the act of cognition as the philosophical tradition suggests, comes from the same specific plane as ‘technique’ and ‘language’. Perception is not the elaboration of sensation in a representation, but rather, for Leroi-Gourhan, it remains fundamentally animal. This is why perception can be said to ‘intervene’: It blocks the natural, imposed rhythms, just as it blocks the *phantasmata* emerging from sensation, and readdresses them to the body of the sender. It reincorporates images springing from these imposed rhythms (the external images coming from the world and the internal ones from the organism itself) and interprets them (in the performative sense of ‘acting’) in the form of new, individuated rhythms. It constructs a ‘corporeity’ that, while not to be equated with the physical body, animates that body and interprets it through figures and gestures by attaching it to a dynamic that is literally emotional.<sup>18</sup>

Leroi-Gourhan did not formulate this ‘theory of perception’ any further because he had different concerns. However, I have introduced the baselines of this theory to gain an understanding of the way in which artistic practices reiterate the question of the body in its milieu today. Among the elements provided by Leroi-Gourhan’s anthropology, the most surprising is the idea that perception, far from anticipating the act of cognition as the philosophical tradition has presumed, belongs to the same specific plane as technique and language. Accordingly, as I have pointed out, perception should not be conceived as an elaboration, i.e. an overtaking of sensation into a higher form of cognitive representation, but it remains visceral and fundamentally animal. In other words, even in humans, perception is a kind of activity that cannot be detached from sensation; it functions as an engine

17 Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, p. 274.

18 On ‘corporeity’, see Michel Bernard, *Le Corps*, second 2nd and revised edition (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1976).

brake that prevents sensation from losing its constructive power and from dissolving into taste by being imagined and intellectualized. It is a regressive faculty that anchors a sensation back into the specific body and that assures the intimate connection between the mechanisms of symbolization and the body. Thus, perception ensures the perennial knot of speech and gesture.

Concurrently with the displacement of the energy of the motor mechanisms towards the mechanisms of symbolization, the palaeontologist thus imbues an inverse power of investment of the visceral 'depths' of the sensation in the individual through the processes of intellection. Through this bias, he further evokes the recharging power of sensitivity through symbolic activity. For Leroi-Gourhan, human perception is a question of the 'spilling over' or 'transferring' of the ideation mechanisms into technical operations. It guarantees the autonomy of individuation processes in the face of processes of subjectivation. This autonomy takes the a-subjective form of rhythms, gestures, and figures that belong to no one and express nothing, but which are the channel of the re-individuation of values and the basis of their reinvention. It is through the materiality of these rhythms, gestures, and forms that the social body remains connected to the specific body and that the social bonds resist their 'massification'.

The remarkable point here is how the individual creativity that underlies the vitality of the social bonds is not anchored in a subjective, autonomous, or 'symbolic' faculty of creation as tradition dictates, but rather in a regressive movement. This brings the process of symbolization back to the sensory apparatus, or, to use Leroi-Gourhan's terms, it brings the social back to the zoological. This is where we find what already was present in Mauss, namely the inscription of the social bonds in a logic of incorporation supported by sensation. Mauss and Leroi-Gourhan thus provide a framework to understand social bonds in different ways than through the hallucinatory power of value.

Both thinkers anchor the processes of subjection of the social subject in the material logic of the body's individuation in the environment. They are particularly interested in distinguishing the development of techniques as a kind of activity in this logical framework. Yet Leroi-Gourhan, in developing his thought in the field of aesthetics and his conception of this material force of individuation and social

bonding as an aesthetic capacity that is realized in rhythms, gestures, and figures, grants it a greater power of actualization than Mauss, who limited it to the sphere of work. Leroi-Gourhan's materialism extends the sphere of politics to aesthetics, which is not only understood as a field of taste, but also as something beyond the sensory faculties of the aesthetic subject, or 'reflecting subject', as one of the essential registers of the specific individual's life. He thus gives us the means to understand why the splitting force of taste, or its power of 'distinction' to borrow a term from Pierre Bourdieu, does not summarize the entirety of aesthetic experience. He also helps us to understand why it remains possible for social subjects to make a living experience of the body in its milieu, through this body that bonds with other bodies using sensation, as well as the work of singularization which we understand as the process of individuation.

Both Mauss and Leroi-Gourhan understand the individuation of the body in the milieu as a material power that is a part of the processes of subjectivation through its ability to form strong connections. Their materialism thus enlarges the sphere of politics beyond the sensitive faculties of the aesthetic subject to all the manifestations of living-speaking bodies. In this sense, it constitutes the basis of a formidable criticism of a theory of value that is only based on the exchange between alienated social subjects.

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