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MARIANNA POYARES

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ABSTRACT: This chapter addresses the use of ethnographic methods in critical social theory, and the assumption that such methods prove to be useful because they allow the researcher to be closer to 'matter itself'. Instead, I argue for ethnography from within a framework of historical materialism and social critique, marking the difference between such 'materialism without matter', based on Marx's 'fetishism of the commodity', and some strategies of New Materialism. My goal is to situate the uses of ethnography for a transformed consideration of the relation between theory and practice.

KEYWORDS: ethnography; historical materialism; critical theory; new materialism

Theory's Method?

Ethnography and Critical Theory

MARIANNA POYARES

INTRODUCTION

Methodological debates in political philosophy and political theory have been gaining increasing importance in academic and non-academic spaces alike.¹ Whether in the ongoing dispute between moralism and realism or in newer formulations such as avant-garde political theory,² it is true to say that the debate concerning the epistemological and ontological commitments of research methods seems to be experiencing a renewal after a period of relative paralysis, a hibernation period arguably stemming from the domination of the Rawlsian framework over mainstream Anglophone political theory.³ One particular topic of interest has been the use of ethnographic methods, broadly understood, in political theory and political philosophy.⁴ A number of articles have been published recently both using

1 I would like to acknowledge the crucial input, critical comments, and encouragement provided by Edward Guetti and Tatiana Llaguno Nieves. I am also grateful to Marcos Nobre for sending me his paper, and to Robin Celikates for his support and his push for fine-tuning. Finally, I would like to thank the blind reviewers for their engagement.

2 Lea Ypi, *Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3 On the dominance of Rawlsianism over the political theory and political philosophy, see Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

4 Matthew Longo and Bernardo Zacka, 'Political Theory in an Ethnographic Key', *American Political Science Review* 1130.4 (2019), pp. 1066–70.

and defending the use of ethnography in political theory and political philosophy: some have adopted a tone like a manifesto while others have made the case for its epistemic advantages. In this paper, I would like to join this emerging trend by establishing a firmer ground that supports the use of ethnographic methods, making clear which normative and epistemic commitments lie in the background of my claim. My goal here is not to formulate a defence of the research method *itself* (which would entail an uncritical understanding of the 'purity' of the method), but a defence of the use of political ethnography by critical social theory. I will contextualize the topic within a longstanding debate in Critical Theory regarding the relationship between theory and practice, a meta-critical stance towards research methods in general, and the issue of emancipation.

I will start by dispersing the aura of novelty or innovation proposed by some supporters of the use of ethnography in political theory and political philosophy. The recovery of certain theoretical tropes has commonly been misidentified as innovation. This has been the case with ethnography in social theory, which has been celebrated by virtue of either its apparent novelty or its attachment to so-called New Materialism. I will show that the use of such a method has been longstanding for feminist and postcolonial theorists, and that it also played a crucial role in the intellectual development of authors associated with the first generation of the Frankfurt School. My goal is to show the longstanding relationship between the use of such methods by theorists that are, in one way or another, associated with the tradition of historical materialism. Secondly, I would like to address and criticize the association, usually attached to the 'novelty' tendency outlined above, that connects the use of ethnography with so-called 'New Materialism'. As 'new materialism' is an incredibly large umbrella term encompassing different positions, my goal here is to oppose the specific claim that ethnography would serve the purpose of bringing the theorist closer to 'matter itself'. I will do this by highlighting what ethnography within a framework of historical materialism looks like, and what its specific epistemic, normative, and, ultimately, (socio-)ontological commitments are. I will primarily outline the commitments of certain strands within the large denomination of New Materialisms in terms of their conceptions of agency, epistemology, and transhumanism. I argue that

such commitments are radically different from the ones I am proposing as productive for the use of ethnography within historical materialism as a materialism that, as pointed out by Étienne Balibar, makes no reference to matter itself.⁵ Finally, I will show that the notion of social form is pivotal for the tradition of historical materialism, arguing that ethnographic methods, and the use of thick descriptions, can be useful tools for investigating social formations while avoiding certain ideological traps and maintaining emancipation as a goal for theory.

AGAINST NOVELTY

In his famous essay *Critical and Traditional Theory*, Max Horkheimer outlines four elements that differentiate critical theory from other types of social theory: critical theory is self-reflexive, insofar as it takes into account its own history and conditions of theoretical formation; it is interdisciplinary insofar as it integrates social theory, empirical research, and philosophical analysis; it is emancipatory insofar as its goal is the production of theory in the service of social emancipation, stressing the connection between the production of theory and that of liberating social change; and, finally, it is materialist in the sense that ‘it is anchored in oppositional experiences and forms of consciousness as well as social and political struggles, from which it takes its cue, but which it does not uncritically follow’.⁶

Instead of focusing on ‘simplistic questions of conscience and clichés about justice’, taking refuge from history in morality and ‘relying on the armoury of its moral indignation’, Horkheimer argued that critique has to be based on the analysis of social reality and its contradictions, and that it can only find its research criteria in the social practices, struggles, experiences, and self-understandings to which critique is connected.⁷ Discussions over the method or methods of empirical research, resulting from a meta-critical stance on research methods has been a constitutive element of Critical Theory.

5 Cf. Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (London: Verso, 1995).

6 As appears in Robin Celikates, ‘Critical Theory and the Unfinished Project of Mediating Theory and Practice’, in *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, ed. by Espen Hammer and Axel Honneth (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 206–20 (p. 208).

7 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

Critical thinking is the function neither of the isolated individual nor of a sum-total of individuals [...]. The subject is no mathematical point like the ego of bourgeois philosophy; his activity is the construction of the social present. Furthermore, the thinking subject is not the place where knowledge and object coincide, nor consequently the starting point for attaining absolute knowledge.⁸

Following these guidelines, it is important to note that the relevance for social theory of conducting ethnographic research should not be understood as a consequence of the inherent superiority of this research method as such. Rather, the relevance is brought out by the methodological scepticism towards the purported autonomy of theory from its social present. Ethnographic research should be understood here in a broad sense and, while participatory observation still remains the central element, different attitudes, including (but not limited to) historical ethnography, the observation of artefacts, or interviews, are also essential to include when detailing the approach. However, the description of such research strategies, although relevant, does not fully capture what is specific about ethnographic sensibility when it comes to the engagement between the theorist and her object. Instead, it is precisely the constant renegotiation of these stratifications insofar as the object is not merely passive, but also defines the scope, nature, and questions pertinent to the research, that is central to establishing this ethnographic sensibility. Therefore, it is crucial that the relationship established between the theorist and her 'object' is a dialectical one and not one based on mere reporting or calculation. As a result, ethnographic methods serve as a strategy for theory to 'enter into a dynamic unity'⁹ with practice, not as a privileged standpoint for the instantiation of theory, but as a starting point for the constitution of theory. Ethnographic research, in other words, constitutes an opportunity for developing a relation between theory and practice, between the theorist and the object of study, and 'in so doing, it serves as an antidote to analytic specialization by alerting us to the remainder — dimensions of social reality that our existing categories fail to capture'.¹⁰

8 Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', in his *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 188–243 (p. 210).

9 *Ibid.*, p. 215

10 Longo and Zacka, 'Political Theory in an Ethnographic Key', p. 1067.

Thus, despite its announcement by some as a great novelty or a new movement within political theory and political philosophy, the use of ethnographic methods within empirical research is not a novelty within the field. Here we could mention Adorno's use of interviews in *The Authoritarian Personality* and Marcuse's analysis of capitalist consumerism in *One-Dimensional Man* as examples; however, ethnographic forays have not been as present here as within Feminist and Postcolonial theory. Ethnographic approaches have been extensively employed by Feminist and Postcolonial scholars ever since the 70s because they are particularly fruitful when challenging universal normative claims: they can reveal the internal biases of theory and the internal contradictions within praxis itself. Examples from these disciplines include, but are not limited to, the various contributions to critical historiography made by the Subaltern Studies collective, Gloria Anzaldúa's use of autobiography to examine the condition of Chicana women in the United States, Judith Butler's analysis of various media's portrayals of state violence during the War on Terror to establish the notion of grievability as a marker for radical equality, or Banu Bargu's work on Turkish political prisoners' use of death fast struggle as a way of weaponizing one's body in an act of resistance. In spite of adopting radically different methods, these examples coalesce under a broad definition of ethnography. I would like to call attention to works — best exemplified here by Bargu's — that use political ethnography as their main methodological framework.

Political ethnography is based on the contextual immersion of the researcher through a number of strategies founded upon ethnographic sensibility, such as participatory observation, first-hand interaction, and conversational interviewing, with the goal of articulating an interpretative framework for the meaning of specific social and political practices in order to intervene in a broader theoretical debate.¹¹ This

11 Banu Bargu provides an illuminating description of the relationship between political ethnography and critical theory in the context of her book *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016): "The contextual immersion, observation and interaction with the participants of the death fast struggle grant us access to highly personal, differentiated, involved narratives, which complicate the conventional approach to human weapons that simply folds them into a fear-mongering discourse of national security and terrorism. But the voices of those near or at the helm of the state also show how the participants of the death fast

kind of research allows critical social theory to 'problemati[ze] re-descriptions',¹² that is, to challenge theoretical presuppositions and vocabularies. Additionally, 'to adopt an ethnographic sensibility is to remain open to the idea that our object of study is not just a "case" to examine in relation to theories we hold independently, but something that tells us more than we knew to ask.'¹³ In other words, the use of political ethnography in social theory moves beyond traditional inductive methodological frameworks, where empirical research is structured to respond to a previously assembled set of questions whose 'sources' or points of conflict have been previously diagnosed or predicted and merely await empirical confirmation. On the contrary, the usefulness of ethnography for critical social theory is precisely that it enables a reciprocal relation between theory and practice. When the four distinctive elements of critical social theory mentioned above — interdisciplinarity, materiality, emancipation, and self-reflexivity — are brought into relation with ethnography, three important elements of the latter approach come to light. The first, which I have just mentioned, is empirical research without the reduction of the object of analysis to the mere instantiation of theory, such as in a case study. The second is the insistence on thick, detailed descriptions as a starting point for theoretical inquiry. The third positions the theorist not as a universal subject but as an individual belonging to a specific class, gender, and race while arguably maintaining a speculative vantage point.

Political ethnography is a useful tool for social theory given its insistence on not grounding the field of research upon the primacy of a priori, abstract, notions of justice or equality, for instance, but rather by looking at how such notions are articulated in the social vocabulary, and how they are enacted and performed by different social groups. It does not begin with an abstract concept but with a 'concrete' concept, so to speak, insofar as it relies on thick descriptions of the

struggle and their actions were perceived [...] bringing into light the articulation of the historical, structural, ideological and pragmatic reason for the choice of strategies that were deployed by the state to address the struggle. [...] The resulting analysis troubles an easy judgement, I think, and thereby aspires to keep open a space in which critical theory can operate' (pp. xiii and xiv).

12 Longo and Zacka, 'Political Theory in an Ethnographic Key', p. 1066.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 1067.

rsocial and political arena. The starting point here described as ‘thick descriptions’ should be understood both as a description itself as well as a critical availability to the act of describing on the part of the theorist, which can possibly include the reformulation of her theoretical vocabulary. The availability of such a critical perspective also allows for further possible identification of contingent phenomena within established orders, opening up the space of normative inquiry towards unforeseen circumstances. In other words, it allows for the possible identification of internal contradictions within normalizing structures, whether in the realm of political phenomena, normative vocabulary, or by highlighting the intrinsic forms of violence and exclusion within such structures.

Finally, a distinctive element of political ethnography that is extremely relevant for empirically engaged social theory is the issue of positionality. The position of the social theorist is neither camouflaged in order to endorse a specific or exemplary kind of objectivity nor, by means of its affirmation, is it considered to signify an automatic embrace of relativism — both of which are equally symptomatic of an understanding of theory that stands above and outside relations of power and ideological structures. Therefore, the emphatic inclusion of positionality must entail more than just a mere addition of a few descriptive lines containing the private history of the scholar, or something like a private confession of the individual in question alongside or within their research findings. What positionality ‘positions’ is not the theorist as an individual but theorizing as a practice. A critically engaged use of positionality serves to dispel the aura of epistemic privilege of the theorist by including her self-understanding as an element of analysis insofar as this understanding constitutes a reflection on the conditions of the actuality of the research itself. It represents a break with the dogmas of objectivism and scientism while, at the same time, avoiding falling into relativism.

Positionality — just like thick descriptions — places the focus on the dialectical and relational aspect of the research. This element is one that has had very little historical resonance amongst philosophers, even those that did engage with empirical research. Adorno and Marcuse, for instance, despite their critical eye towards positivism in the social sciences, and their insistence on the dual character of empirical

research (both normative and descriptive), have not included what I am here defining as positionality in the scope of their methodological inquiries. Postcolonial and feminist theorists, on the other hand, have engaged extensively with positionality, showing how supposedly impartial and universal normative standards are biased in relation to, mainly but not exclusively, gender and race.¹⁴

A RETURN TO MATTER

The concern with providing clarity for the relational constitution of the research itself is particularly relevant when working with social movements and oppressed groups. However, in recent years, many projects within the humanities and the social sciences have developed an increasing interest in non-human objects and nature, advocating a return to materiality in order to provide new interpretative frameworks for the social world. The so-called New Materialism consists of a heterogeneous field and assembles under this umbrella term a number of thinkers and theories that do not necessarily stand in perfect harmony with one another. Given the range of the term, I do not claim that all authors identified as New Materialists strictly follow or would even necessarily agree with the description I offer below, and if I did not properly acknowledge this fact it might render my criticism unfair or irrelevant for some positions. What I offer is a defence of ethnographic methods within critical social theory that stands in contrast to some descriptions that have been offered as paradigmatic in the New Materialist Turn. The reason I bring this dialogue into the debate about the relevance of ethnographic research methods within critical social theory is precisely because this move has, on multiple occasions, been identified as a trend within new materialism, understood as a strategy of approximation between the researcher and 'matter itself'. I would like to mark the difference between this trend and the use of such a method within canonical examples of historical materialism precisely to provide a sharp distinction in what is considered to be the relevance of such a method: while New Materialists claim that ethnographic

14 See, for instance, Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

research enables the coming into relation with material agency, the one that I am proposing, associated with historical materialism, claims no reference to matter itself.

The New Materialist Turn is usually associated with two areas ‘where there is sufficient overlapping around a distinctive reorientation for these areas to serve as identifying markers of new materialist thinking.’¹⁵ The first is a renewed interest in non-anthropocentric, matter-oriented ontology. This ontological commitment arises out of what is portrayed to be a rupture with the Kantian paradigm that, it is claimed, inaugurated a ‘general anti-realist trend’ marked by a strong representationalism that emphasizes the mediation of reality by epistemic and linguistic processes. The main charge against representationalism, however, seems to lie not so much on the grounds of this mediation as it does on an unargued (in the case of Kant) yet historically entrenched understanding of matter as, itself, passive. The excessive weight conferred, amongst others by the Kantian tradition, upon a nexus of normative interaction, between what is supposed to be inert matter and the spiritual bestowals that grant matter its proper dynamicity, is identified as a questionable theoretical assumption underpinning the anthropocentric character of Western thought. In an effort to dislocate and challenge this tradition, one of the main arguments of the New Materialists — one that serves to dismantle binary distinctions such as nature/culture and organic/inorganic — is their emphasis on matter’s agency. This is the second distinctive area of interest for New Materialists.

New Materialist ontology, also known as vital materialism or material vitalism, does not understand matter as fixed and inert but as a continuous and, more importantly, as a contingent process of materialization. According to Diana Coole:

Firstly, this is not about Being, but becoming: crucially, what is invoked is a process not a state, a process of materialisation in which matter literally matters itself. Secondly, this is not, then, the dead, inert, passive matter of the mechanist, which relied on an external agent — human or divine — to set it in motion.

15 Diana Coole, ‘Agentic Capacities and Capacious Historical Materialism: Thinking with New Materialisms in the Political Sciences’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41.3 (2013), pp. 451–69 (p. 452).

Rather, it is a materialisation that contains its own energies and forces of transformation. It is self-organising, *sui generis*.¹⁶

Therefore, contingent processes of self-constitution are expressions of the intrinsic constitution and rationality of matter, understood here not only as *sui generis* but, more importantly, as *causa sui*. The argument that matter, itself, is agential and not inert references the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as laying the foundations for vital materialism. This is seen in the case of Rosi Braidotti's argument for the intelligent vitality, or self-organizing capacity, of matter, which leads to a 'zoe-centred egalitarianism' wherein the shift from agency to agentic capacities stands against a tradition that associates agency with (human) volition, deliberation, and intellect.¹⁷ By moving from agency to agentic capacities, new materialists have argued that 'agentic capacities are diffused across many different types of material entity' and that this 'decouple[s] agency from humans while raising questions about the nature of life and of the place or status of the human within it'.¹⁸ Such capacities are, according to this view, proper to matter itself; they are contingently revealed in interactions, which, understood here beyond the anthropocentric fixation on agency, allows for a collapsing of the traditional dualisms such as nature/culture which I referred to earlier.

The transhumanist and vitalist focus on agentic capacities arises out of very different arguments. My concern here is with the so-called neo-ontological materialisms which draw upon quantum physics or upon general descriptions of biological processes that understand vitalism to occur in a spontaneous speculative organization of natural processes. In this perspective matter is conceptualized under the framework of relational ontology in the sense that being, or matter, is constituted by dynamic relationships between elements. Susanne Lettow has argued that this position results in two shortcomings. The first concerns epistemology, which, in this context, is no longer understood as the critical interrogation of knowledge claims, including the claim to know matter itself. Lettow takes issue with Karen Barad's

16 Ibid., p. 453

17 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 60.

18 Coole, 'Agentic Capacities', p. 457.

important contribution by highlighting how, despite her attention to distinct features of human cognition, she positions intelligibility as an expression of matter's agency. Therefore 'practices of knowing cannot be fully claimed as human practices, not simply because we use non-human elements in our practices but because knowing is a matter of part of the world making itself intelligible to another part'.¹⁹ Life, as matter, is understood here as a cosmological force, as the unfolding of natural processes, as an expressions of the intelligent organization and reorganization of matter, and generically described as a primordial logic of being where 'epistemic practices are articulated as part of a metaphysical, even cosmological logic of anonymous forces that shape the world'.²⁰ The problem with this kind of approach is that by assuming material agency to be conceptually expressive, it not only rejects the Kantian paradigm under which there is no unmediated knowledge, no knowledge of things in themselves, but actually brings us to a pre-critical standpoint in which the refusal of mediation becomes a totality of theory or, from a different perspective, the intelligible organization of nature.

This epistemic immediacy — one could even say, epistemic transparency — of matter forecloses a deeper engagement with critical epistemology. 'With regard to epistemology, the attempt to conceive of the totality of being, the quest for a direct and immediate access to being or the real rejects the always precarious and partial position of the epistemic subject'.²¹ Material vitality does not, per se, entail the dissolution of epistemic questions regarding the production of knowledge, the categorization of phenomena and its social-historical conditions — not unless we also adopt substantive metaphysical or epistemic commitments such as understanding intelligibility as an expression of material vitality. In the same vein, a rejection of the nature/culture division does not entail an adoption of posthumanism in which we erase the very specific relationships at play between human and non-human actors. Donna Haraway, in her essay 'Situated Knowledges', reminds us

19 Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28.3 (2003), pp. 801–31 (p. 829).

20 Susanne Lettow, 'Turning the Turn: New Materialism, Historical Materialism and Critical Theory', *Thesis Eleven*, 140.1 (2017), pp. 106–21 (p. 109).

21 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

that 'the world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favour of a master decoder.'²² The issue of a presumed disappearance is precisely why I call this erasure of epistemology in favour of the intelligible immediacy of matter 'dogmatic' in the Kantian sense of the term.

Furthermore, there is a second problematic element associated with this reading of material vitalism, represented by theories such as Braidotti's zoe-centred egalitarianism. By uncritically adopting a supposedly generic language such as 'flows', 'exchanges', and 'fields of forces' to describe all phenomena, such theories violently flatten radically different phenomena, especially social phenomena. By 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', one assumes that power relations and physical forces are both epistemically transparent and ontologically analogous. This kind of interpretation blurs the distinction between (socially and historically constituted) human agency and non-human agency, and thereby creates a second foreclosure: that of the normative, political, dimension of human agency.²³ As a result, the normative and emancipatory character of theory are eclipsed.

It is important to note that a critique of discrete matter along the lines of the critique of the Newtonian model doesn't of itself amount to the speculative transparency of material vitality, nor to a description of agency that collapses the structural disparities between human and non-human agency. Such a position is not the first awakening from the

22 Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988), pp. 575–99 (p. 593). I use Haraway here as an example of an author associated with New Materialism who, nonetheless, does not share the view that I am criticizing in this paper. I do this on purpose in order to also illustrate that, despite my criticism, given the comprehensiveness of the term 'new materialist' and the different positions associated with it, there is certainly a good deal of opportunity for approximations and alliances with historical materialism.

23 Lettow, 'Turning the Turn', p. 111: 'The general problem here is that agency is transferred to anonymous, meta-historical forces like matter or life, and this means that social relations and the practices they result from cannot be adequately analyzed. This includes the highly specific and historically contingent forms of human-nature relations and socio-technological regimes that need to be studied with regard to the very specific and highly stratified assemblages of "human" and "nonhuman" agents. To analyze such assemblages would require a differentiated theory of subjectivity which is able to distinguish between the specific forms of dynamics, activity and praxis that characterize the different entities.'

great slumber of hylomorphism because critiques of hylomorphism have been present throughout the history of philosophy. This begs the question — what kind of materialism is historical materialism if it is not one committed to an engagement with matter itself? This is a question surrounded by extensive debate and a longstanding history. Theorists associated with the first generation of the Frankfurt School such as Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Adorno, as well as others who moved away from the scientificism of early historical materialism, sought to emphasize the social and historical aspects of theory as such, and not only of social theory. This does not necessarily imply the denial of material vitality, but it does insist that any understanding of material vitality is socially and historically determined.

A RESEARCH METHOD FOR A THEORY OF SOCIAL FORM

I would like to call attention to a crucially relevant distinction within Marxist theory, namely the focus on the commodity form as a real phantasmagoria.²⁴ In his writings regarding the current status of idealism and materialism, Marx alluded to the pitfalls of the idealist/materialist debate of his time by stressing the well-known shortcomings of idealism along with those of a materialism that makes direct references to bodies and objects as haunted by an idealist foundation.²⁵ The famous passage on the fetishism of the commodity, usually read as the intervention of the notion of praxis over idealist structural-

24 This specific focus on the commodity, and its concern with labour as the kind of practice that institutes it, has been identified by some, e.g. Bruno Latour, as fundamentally anthropocentric. Judith Butler has recently made the case against this interpretation by recuperating Marx's notions of the organic and the inorganic body stressing how the kind of agency that is actualized in labour is dialectically constituted by non-human agency as well. Cf. Judith Butler, 'The Inorganic Body in the Early Marx: A Concept-Limit in Anthropocentrism', *Radical Philosophy*, 2.6 (Winter 2019), pp. 3–17.

25 'He also saw very clearly that, from this point of view, the "old materialisms" or philosophies of nature, which substitute matter for mind as the organizing principle, contain a strong element of idealism and are, in the end, merely disguised idealisms (whatever their very different political consequences). This enables us to understand why it is so easy for idealism to "comprehend" materialism and therefore to refute it or integrate it (as we see in Hegel, who has no problem with materialisms, except perhaps with that of Spinoza, but Spinoza is a rather atypical materialist ...)' (Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, p. 24).

ism, can also be read as an argument against a reductionist ontological materialism.

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the social-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social.²⁶

Furthermore, the mystery of the commodity form cannot be solved by redirecting our gaze to the object as 'simple' matter, or to the body as a 'simple' body, precisely because bodies are already constituted by systems of differential categorization, articulation, identification, and hierarchization, and it is not in the 'materiality of the body' that one would find the justification for, or grounding principle of, its commodification.

[T]he commodity form, and the value relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. [...] As the foregoing analysis has already demonstrated, this fetishism of the world of commodities arises from the peculiar social character of the labour which produces them.²⁷

The object of critical social theory, therefore, cannot be matter itself, given that the significance of material reality as such is already determined by social and historical relations. The very impetus to find the ground of social formations in 'pure matter' is already a symptom of fetishism. For example, a body that is marked as female 'expresses

26 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 3 vols (London: Penguin, 1976), I, trans. by Ben Fowkes, pp. 164–65.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

female experience at a particular time and place, located within a particular set of social relations.’²⁸ By understanding the commodity form as a social form and focusing on this ‘real abstraction’ as one of the central elements of his theory, Marx implodes the old antagonism between idealism and materialism by showing how the two are not mutually exclusive but mutually dependent.

What concerns us here is the objectivity of the ‘phantasmagorical’ phenomenon of the commodity. By shifting the focus of inquiry from matter ‘itself’ or reason to social formations, and by understanding social formations not as instantiations of abstract categories but as historically determined, real abstractions, Marx collapses the apparent division of matter/form into the unity of a social form. Additionally, abandoning the paradigm of individual agency as foundational for action and focusing on the conditions of possibility of action means that the urge to liberate agency from the schema of subjective volition and deliberation — which some have associated with the Kantian tradition — appears incredibly superfluous, given that representations, even those of ‘matter itself’, are already expressions of a collective life. Critical social theory fulfils the dual criteria of being aware that it emerges out of the same object that it enquires into — that is, social form — and it is only by virtue of this that it can satisfy the four elements mentioned earlier: being emancipatory, interdisciplinary, materialist, and self-reflexive.

Historical materialism stands, therefore, as a ‘materialism that has nothing to do with a reference to matter’. The term ‘materialism

28 Nancy Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism’, in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (New York: Kluwer, 1983), pp. 283–310 (p. 303). On this topic, Joseph Fracchia makes an important argument regarding the contribution of historical materialism: ‘Although gender is a cultural construct, if humans reproduced asexually, there would be no foundation for its construction. The problem lies not in the recognition of physiological differences, but in the issuance of hierarchical verdicts on their significance that both produce and support exploitation, oppression and discrimination. The particular content of those semiotic forms cannot be predicted by any general theory. But it can be analysed in a historical-materialist manner and understood as the particular product of people living within a specific set of social relations inscribing particular meanings onto what are constructed as racialised or gendered bodies’ (Joseph Fracchia, ‘Beyond the Nature-Human Debate: Human Corporeal Organization as First Fact of Historical Materialism’, *Historical Materialism*, 13.1 (2005), pp. 33–62 (p. 56)).

without matter', used by Balibar in his *The Philosophy of Marx*, was borrowed from a letter from Jacobi to Fichte. The object of historical materialist critique is a (real) living phantasmagoria created by the inversion between labour and value, where labour seems to have been socialized by the value-form. The reference to 'materialism without matter' contains the need for a profound rethinking of the constitution of (social) objectivity as well as that of subjectivity. These debates about the mutual constitution of objectivity and subjectivity, as well as that of theory and practice, have been longstanding and must be interpreted as developments of the debate concerning form and matter, where the notion of social form, or 'social formations' — to avoid a language that could be interpreted as reificatory — is the object of historical material critique. If the objects of critique are social formations, then such formations are not transparent because their constitutive processes of inversion, such as that of labour and value, are made opaque, among others, by ideological structures. The question here is not one of proceeding by assuming the falsity of social form and searching for its origin or genetic code hidden within the mere illusions of social formations, but rather of analysing its internal contradictions. To put it another way, contradictions are not the expression or the explosion of a hidden, suppressed, raw genetic element, but rather developments which potentially expose the social and historical character of the phantasmagoria at play, potentially leading to change.

The four elements of critical social theory outlined in the first section of this paper (reflexive, interdisciplinary, materialist, and emancipatory) stand not as a mere list of intentions but as a development of this notion of social form as well as what theory, and its relationship to practice, entails. From the elements mentioned, the element concerning the emancipatory character of theory has generally been regarded as aspirational when it is, in fact, structural. As Balibar writes,

the theme of domination must thus be at the centre of the discussion. Marx does not produce a theory of the constitution of ideologies as discourses, as particular or general systems of representation and then merely retrospectively raises the question of domination: that question is always already included in the elaboration of the concept.²⁹

29 Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, p. 45.

Moreover, the recent dominance of debates concerning the normative standards of critique has eclipsed the traditional discussion regarding the relationship between theory and practice, which has led to accusations of stagnation within critical theory. The return to such a debate is crucial because of its ability to fulfil the emancipatory potential of theory through simultaneously placing the relationship of theory-making and practice at the centre, avoiding the dogmatic separation between theorist and non-theorist, and denying the premise that the self-understanding of agents is irrelevant, or even detrimental, to empirical research.

As these challenges and the foundational problems they stem from — that of the methodological status of critical theory, its relation to practice, and the corresponding role of the critical theorist — are still with us today, one hopes they will no longer be pushed into the background by the dominance of the debate on the normative standards of critique but be discussed in their own right. [...] This suggests that the emancipatory orientation of critical theory is internally linked to its double reflexivity: only reflection on the context in which a theory emerged and in which it is used — a twofold dependency of theory on practice — enables an adequate understanding of the practical character of theory itself, and thus a break with the dogma of scientism and objectivism.³⁰

The re-awakening of the question of the relationship between theory and practice entails, necessarily, a re-awakening of the discussion regarding methodology. And it is equally interesting to note how the prevalence of debates concerning the normative standards of social theory has also side-lined the discussion regarding empirically engaged research methods. Although social movements and institutions have been a preferential object of research for critical theorists, a number of questions remain regarding the actualization of research: how to proceed, and how to select which social struggles to focus upon, in a world of total administration and totalizing domination? In a world where, in contrast to fifty years ago, 'socialism is no longer the focus of emancipatory hopes; social movements have proliferated in a decentred way;

30 Celikates, 'Critical Theory', pp. 217–18.

and value horizons have been pluralized'?³¹ How can critical social theory be pursued in a society where domination is experienced as freedom? Or should critical theorists, as Nancy Fraser suggests, not only engage with normative analysis but also with proposing programmatic and institutional solutions?³² I do not wish to claim that the adoption of a specific methodology alone would supply an answer to such questions, although the reflection on the importance of methodology constitutes part of the theorist's commitment to answering such challenges. Nonetheless, whether or not critical theorists have a normative or more programmatic goal they definitely benefit immensely from empirically engaged research, maintaining the old 'unity between practice and theory' as a central concern.

If critical theory is sequestered from social engagement and activism, vacating the very domain from which the political problematic emerges, it deprives itself of the capacity to trace that very emergence. This important relation between working inside and outside of the academy is linked to the further problem of the border between the university and its world. Such a critical practice neither takes distance from facts nor negates their existence or importance; on the contrary, a constellation of such 'facts' impresses itself upon our thinking, and so the world acts on us and exercises a historical demand on thought.³³

By understanding theory as the relation between theorist and object, and by relying on thick descriptions as the starting point of theoretical inquiry, political ethnography provides a useful platform for social theory while having real current struggles as its main focus point. Moreover, such research disavows any presupposition of 'automatic translation of social position into epistemic privilege, and of epistemic

31 Marcos Nobre, 'How Practical Can Critical Theory Be?', in *Critical Theory and the Challenge of Praxis*, ed. by Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 159–72 (p. 167).

32 Cf. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 198–99: 'Unlike their predecessors, finally, today's critical theorists cannot assume that all normatively justified claims will converge on a single programme for institutional change. Rather, they must take on the hard cases — those, for example, in which claims for minority cultural recognition conflict with claims for gender equality — and tell us how to resolve them'. Also in Nobre, 'How Practical Can Critical Theory Be?', p. 167.

33 Butler, 'The Inorganic Body', p. 4.

privilege into political progressiveness,'³⁴ which, alongside the use of naïve and vague descriptions of social movements — either through superficial or instrumental engagement with such movements, when the theorist engages with political practice only to locate his already-tailored research questions — constitute two extremely problematic features of empirically engaged theory. Ethnographic research is particularly attentive to ideological traps that may not only be invisible to the theorist but also to the activist while, arguably, maintaining a specifically emancipatory role for critique. On the other hand, the critical theorist must enter a relation of partnership with those around her, 'a dialogical struggle for appropriate interpretations and the realization of transformative potentials,'³⁵ for which positionality, understood here not as mere subjective expression, but also as attention to unforeseen biases and blockages while also engaging in dialogical interpretations and realizations of emancipatory potentials, is an important element. Finally, it makes the speculative vocabulary available to redescriptions, as well as to the reflections and input made by those engaged with the social struggle. Political ethnography is a fruitful method for transforming the asymmetry between theorist and activist into a dialogical relation, but only if we understand critical social theory as *already* being a social practice.

34 Celikates, 'Critical Theory', p. 217.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 218.

Marianna Poyares, 'Theory's Method?: Ethnography and Critical Theory', in *Materialism and Politics*, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and Aysel Yuva, *Cultural Inquiry*, 20 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 345–63 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-20_19>

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