

- 19 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 6, 118, emphasis added.
- 20 Ibid., chap. 11, 167. Each of us, Hobbes remarks, is “curious in the search of the causes of their own good and evill fortune” (chap. 12, 168).
- 21 This particular claim is Jean Hampton’s, although the presumption that desires and fears originate within the subject is a feature of many interpretations of Hobbes. See Hampton, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition*, 6.
- 22 Patchen Markell uses the notion of temporality to capture how something “links an agent’s past and present to her future.” See Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, 10. In a very interesting argument about aesthetic experiences of fear, Philip Fisher periodizes what he identifies as two different temporal movements of fear. In his analysis, the “classic” model of fear involves a temporal movement akin to the movement of the future anterior—the imagination of this single moment soon to be past from the perspective of an imagined future. The other model is distinctively modern, he argues, and involves a temporal movement that is more straightforwardly an open serial into an unpredictable and uncertain future. See Fisher, “The Aesthetics of Fear.” Let me note here that while Fisher claims that Hobbes provides us with the prototype of this modern temporal movement of fear, the temporality that I identify in Hobbes’s account of fear is quite different.
- 23 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 6, 118.
- 24 Hobbes, *De Corpore*, chap. 25, 390.
- 25 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 6, 121.
- 26 Of course, given the crucial role that memory plays in the process of perception, we must acknowledge that a memory of an absent object is necessarily nested in the perception of a present object. See my “Hobbes and the Matter of Self-Consciousness.” However, for the present purposes, the simpler distinction between absent and present objects will suffice.
- 27 In a provocative analysis, Brian Massumi uses the notion of recursivity in relation to the temporality of perception. See *Parables of the Virtual*, 15.
- 28 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 3, 97.
- 29 Hobbes says that “A *Signe*, is the Event Antecedent, of the Consequent; and contrarily, the Consequent of the Antecedent, when the like Consequences have been observed, before: And the oftner they have been observed, the lesse uncertain is the *Signe*.” Ibid., chap. 3, 98.
- 30 Hobbes observes that “this is certain: by how much one man has more experience of things past, than another; by so much also he is more Prudent, and his expectations the seldomer fail him” (chap. 3, 97). Yet, he notes, “Signes of prudence are all uncertain; because to observe by experience, and remember all circumstances that may alter the successe, is impossible” (chap. 5, 117).
- 31 Phillips, *Terrors and Experts*, 53.
- 32 It is important to point out that the expectation in the feeling of fear does not

- in itself include the subject’s sense of his or her capacity or incapacity to act to evade or repel the object of fear. If it encompassed the subject’s feelings of competence or incompetence, the fearful feeling would instead be the feeling of courage or the feeling of despair, respectively. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 6, 123. As “a certain foresight of future evil,” fear is about the possibilities rather than the capacities for agency. The latter quote comes from Hobbes, *De Cive*, chap. 1, 6.
- 33 Hobbes himself claims that the laws promulgated by the sovereign are aimed at guiding or mapping the possibilities for action. He writes that the purpose of the laws is “not to bind the People from all Voluntary actions; but to direct and keep them from such a motion, as not to hurt themselves by their own impetuous desires, rashnesse, or indiscretion, as Hedges are set, not to stop Travellers, but to keep them in the way.” Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 30, 388.
- 34 In fact, Hobbes points out that it is not until there is a sovereign articulation of law that an individual can be considered a person whose will is ascriptively taken as the cause of his or her actions (chap. 16, 217–20).
- 35 Hobbes specifies in numerous places in his work that the power of the sovereign is effective in action only insofar as the opinions and actions of subjects and the sovereign’s deputies make it so. For example, in *Behemoth*, Hobbes claims that the power of the sovereign rests on nothing “but . . . the opinion and belief of the people.” See Hobbes, *Behemoth, or the Long Parliament*, chap. 1, 16. Likewise, he claims in *Leviathan* that the “Actions of men proceed from their Opinions, and in the wel governing of Opinions, consisteth the wel governing of men’s Actions, in order to their Peace, and Concord” (chap. 18, 233). One might also consider book 2 of *Leviathan*, in which Hobbes specifies the different ways in which the sovereign’s power is constituted through reputation and the opinion held by the many people over whom it must rule.
- 36 For an analysis of a contemporary instance of this dynamic, see Nelson, “The President and Presidentialism.”

William E. Connolly

Materialities of Experience

I seek to come to terms with the materiality of perception by placing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze into conversations with each other and all of them with recent work in neuroscience. The first conversation has been obstructed by the judgment that Merleau-Ponty is a phenomenologist while the latter two are opposed to phenomenology. My sense, however, is that there is a phenomenological moment in both Foucault and Deleuze. Moreover, the conception of the subject they criticize is one from which Merleau-Ponty progressively departed. He also moved toward a conception of nonhuman nature which, he thought, was needed to redeem themes in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. This double movement—revising the idea of the subject and articulating a conception of nature compatible with it—draws Merleau-Ponty closer to what I will call a philosophy of immanence. Whether that migration was completed or punctuated by a moment of transcendence is a question I will not answer here.

By immanence I mean a philosophy of becoming in which the universe is not dependent on a higher power. It is reducible to neither mechanistic materialism, dualism, theo-teleology nor the absent God of minimal theology. It concurs with the last three philosophies that there is more to reality than actuality. But that “more” is not given by a

robust or minimal God. We bear no debts or primordial guilt for being, even if there are features of the human condition that tempt many to act as if we do.¹ Rather, there are uncertain exchanges between stabilized formations and mobile forces that subsist within and below them. Biological evolution, the evolution of the universe, radical changes in politics, and the significant conversion experiences of individuals attest to the periodic amplification of such circuits of exchange.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari state the idea this way. First, they challenge the idea of transcendence lodged “in the mind of a god, or in the unconscious of life, of the soul, or of language, . . . always inferred.” Second, they affirm historically shifting “relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between unformed elements, or at last between elements that are relatively unformed, molecules and particles of all kinds.”² Such a philosophy of “movement and rest” does not imply that everything is always in flux, though its detractors often reduce it to that view.³ It means that though any species, thing, system, or civilization may last for a long time, nothing lasts forever. Each force field (set in the chrono-time appropriate to it) oscillates between periods of relative arrest and periods of heightened imbalance and change, followed again by new stabilizations. The universe does not consist of long cycles of repetition, exhibit linear causality, or have an intrinsic purpose in being, but, as the Nobel prize-winning chemist Ilya Prigogine puts it, “our universe is far from equilibrium, nonlinear and full of irreversible processes.”⁴

There is no denying that we humans—while often differing from one another—*judge* the new outcomes to which we are exposed or that we have helped usher into being. What is denied is that the judgments express an eternal law or bring us into attunement with an intrinsic purpose of being. For immanent materialists deny there is such a law or intrinsic purpose. We anchor our ethics elsewhere and in a different way.

Immanent materialism is defined in contrast to mechanistic materialism, too. Many causal relations are not susceptible to either efficient or mechanical modes of analysis. There are efficient causes, as when, to take a classic example, one billiard ball moves another in a specific direction. But *emergent causality*—the dicey process by which new entities and processes periodically surge into being—is irreducible to efficient causality. It is a mode in which new forces can trigger novel patterns of *self-organization* in a thing, species, system, or being, sometimes allowing something new to

emerge from the swirl back and forth between them: a new species, state of the universe, weather system, ecological balance, or political formation.

Merleau-Ponty traveled from his early work on perception to an image that draws humanity closer to the rest of nature than the dominant philosophies of the past had proposed. A certain pressure to pursue that journey was always there: a layered theory of human embodiment faces pressure to identify selective *affinities* between the capacities of humans and other living beings and physical systems.

Consider some statements from *Nature*, a collection of lectures given by Merleau-Ponty just before his untimely death: "Thus, for instance, the Nature in us must have some relation to Nature outside of us; moreover, Nature outside of us must be unveiled to us by the Nature that we are. . . . We are part of some Nature, and reciprocally, it is from ourselves that living beings and even space speak to us."⁵ Here Merleau-Ponty solicits affinities between human and nonhuman nature. Does he also suggest that, once preliminary affinities have been disclosed, it is possible to organize experimental investigations to uncover dimensions of human and nonhuman nature previously outside the range of that experience? And that these findings might then be folded into an enlarged experience of ourselves and the world?⁶ If so, when the neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran, using magnetic imaging and other technologies of observation, exposes body-brain processes in the production of phantom pain exceeding those assumed in Merleau-Ponty's experiential account of it,⁷ those findings could be folded into the latter's account along with the techniques Ramachandran invented to relieve such pain. Here *experimental* and *experiential* perspectives circulate back and forth, with each sometimes triggering a surprising change in the other. Consider another formulation: "All these ideas (vitalism, entelechy) suppose preformation, yet modern embryology defines the thesis of epigenesis. . . . The future must not be contained in the present. . . . It would be arbitrary to understand this history as the epiphenomenon of a mechanical causality. Mechanistic thinking rests upon a causality which traverses and never stops in something."⁸

"The future must not be contained in the present." Just as the future of human culture is not sufficiently determined by efficient causes from the past, in nonhuman nature, too — when the chrono-periods identified are appropriate to the field in question — the future is not sufficiently con-

tained in the present. Now mechanical causality, vitalism, and entelechy, on Merleau-Ponty's reading of them at least, bite the dust together.

But if the future is not sufficiently contained in the present, what enables change over short and long periods? Here Merleau-Ponty approaches an orientation now familiar in the work of scientists such as Ilya Prigogine in chemistry, Brian Goodwin and Lynn Margulis in biology, Antonio Damasio and Ramachandran in neuroscience, and Stephen Gould in evolutionary biology:⁹ "The outlines of the organism in the embryo constitute a factor of imbalance. It is not because humans consider them as outlines that they are such but because they break the current balance and fix the conditions for a future balance."¹⁰ The "imbalance" noted by Merleau-Ponty is close to what Deleuze calls the "asymmetry of nature," an energized asymmetry that periodically sets the stage, when other conditions are in place, for old formations to disintegrate and new ones to surge into being. It bears a family resemblance to Prigogine's account of systems that enter a period of "disequilibrium" and to the behavior "on the edge of chaos" that Brian Goodwin studies when a species either evolves into a new, unpredictable one or faces extinction. Merleau-Ponty, in alliance with these thinkers, does not shift from a mechanical conception of natural order to a world of chaos. He suggests that in each object domain periods of imbalance alternate with those of new and imperfect stabilizations. I take these formulations to support the adventure pursued here.

The Complexity of Perception

Visual perception involves a complex mixing — during the half-second delay between the reception of sensory experience and the formation of an image — of language, affect, feeling, touch, and anticipation.¹¹ This mixing is set in the memory-infused life of human beings whose experience is conditioned by the previous discipline of the chemical-electrical *network* in which perception is set and by the characteristic *shape* of human embodiment and motility. Human mobility is enabled by our two-leggedness and the position of the head at the top of the body, with two eyes pointed forward. This mode of embodiment, for instance, encourages the production of widespread analogies between a future "in front of us" and the past "behind us." Most importantly, the act of perception is permeated by

implicit reference to the position and mood of one's own body in relation to the phenomenal field.¹² Experience is grasped, says Merleau-Ponty, "first in its meaning for us, for that heavy mass which is our body, whence it comes about that it always involves reference to the body."¹³ My "body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task. And indeed its spatiality is not . . . a *spatiality of position* but a *spatiality of situation*."¹⁴

We also need to come to terms with how perception is *intersensory*, never fully divisible into separate sense experiences.¹⁵ For example, visual experience is saturated with the tactile history of the experiencing agent. The tactile and the visual are interwoven, in that my history of touching objects similar to the one in question is woven into my current vision of it. A poignant example of this is offered by Laura Marks, as she elucidates a film scene in which the composition of voice and the grainy visual image convey the daughter's tactile memory of her deceased mother's skin.¹⁶ Similarly, language and sense experience are neither entirely separate nor reducible to one another. They are imbricated in a way that allows each to exceed the other in experience: "the sense being held within the word, and the word being the external existence of the sense."¹⁷

Continuing down this path, Merleau-Ponty indicates how the color of an object triggers an affective charge. People with specific motor disturbances make jerky movements if the color field is blue and more smooth ones if it is red or yellow. And in "normal" subjects, too, the visual field of color is interwoven with an experience of warmth or coldness that precedes and infuses specific awareness of it, depending upon whether the field is red or blue (209, 211). This field of inter-involvement, in turn, flows into that between color and sound, in which specific types of sound infect the experience of color, intensifying or dampening it (228). Words participate in this process, too, as when the "word 'hard' produces a stiffening of the back or neck." Even "before becoming the indication of a concept the word is first an event which grips my body, and this grip circumscribes the area of significance to which it has reference" (235). The "before" in this sentence does not refer to an uncultured body but to a preliminary tendency in encultured beings. To put the point another way, the imbrications between embodiment, language, disposition, perception, and mood are always in operation. A philosophy of language that ignores these essential connections may appear precise and rigorous, but it

does so by missing circuits of inter-involvement through which perception is organized.

These preliminary experiences vary across individuals and cultures, and those variations are important to an appreciation of cultural diversity. The key point, however, is that some series of inter-involvements is always encoded into the preliminary character of experience, flowing into the tone and color of perception. Phenomenologists, Buddhist monks, corporate advertisers, cultural anthropologists, neuroscientists, TV dramatists, Catholic priests, filmmakers, and evangelical preachers are attuned to such memory-soaked patterns of inter-involvement. Too many social scientists, analytic philosophers, rational choice theorists, deliberative democrats, and "intellectualists" of various sorts are less so. An intellectualist, to Merleau-Ponty, is one who overstates the autonomy of conceptual life, the independence of vision, the self-sufficiency of reason, the power of pure deliberation, or the self-sufficiency of argument.

Here is a juncture at which the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty meets the recent discovery of mirror neurons by the neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti. To both, social experience is not merely mediated by the web of language, it is also infused by the ability humans and monkeys have to read and mimic the intentions of others before and below language. Thus Rizzolatti explores how culturally coded mirror neurons allow us both to read the intentions of others immediately and to rehearse their behavior enough to install some of those tendencies into our own body schemas. Here is one way Rizzolatti makes the point: "the sight of acts performed by others produces an immediate activation of the motor areas deputed to the organization and execution of those acts . . . ; through this activation it is possible to decipher the meaning of the 'motor events' observed, i.e., to understand them in terms of goal centred movements. This understanding is completely devoid of any reflexive, conceptual and or linguistic mediation, as it is based on the vocabulary of acts and the motor knowledge on which our capacity to act depends."¹⁸ It is important to emphasize that the mirror neurons doing the work do not simply express a fixed genetic inheritance. They themselves become culturally coded through the give and take of experience. Language-mediated experience without this background of less mediated interpretation would be reduced to a perception "purely cognitive in form, pale, colorless, destitute of emotional warmth."¹⁹ I take Merleau-Ponty to agree in advance

nization occurs. Perception depends upon projection into experience of multiple perspectives you do not now have. This automatic projection into experience also makes it seem that objects see you as you see them. Merleau-Ponty puts it this way: In this “strange adhesion of the seer and the visible, . . . *I feel myself looked at by the things*, my activity is equally a passivity.”²⁴ To have the experience of depth is to feel things looking at you, to feel yourself as object. This self-awareness is usually subliminal, but it becomes more apparent when you shift from the process of action-oriented perception to dwell in experience itself. The result is uncanny: to see is to experience yourself as an object of visibility, not simply in that you realize someone *could* look at you because you are composed of opaque materiality, but also because the very structure of vision incorporates into itself the projection of what it would be like to be seen from a variety of angles. This experience codifies, in the anticipatory structure of perception, potential angles of vision upon yourself and what it would be like to touch, hold, or move the object from different angles. The codification of operational angles of possible action and the background sense of being seen combine to produce depth.

That codification, however, cannot be reduced to the sum of all angles, to a view from *nowhere*, because each potential angle of vision fades into a diffuse background against which it is set. The codification, then, is closer to a view from *everywhere*, a view projected as a norm into an experience that depends upon implicit reference to it. In an essay on Merleau-Ponty, Sean Dorrance Kelly pulls these themes of anticipation and perspective together. First, the experience of a particular light or color is normative in the sense that “each presentation of the color in a given lighting context necessarily makes an implicit reference to a more completely presented *real* color, the color as it would be revealed if the lighting context were changed in the direction of the norm. This real color, implicitly referred to in every experience, is the constant color I see the color *to be*.” Second, “the view from everywhere” built into the experience of depth is not a view you could ever actually have, separate from these memory-soaked projections, because there is no potential perspective that could add up the angles and backgrounds appropriate to all perspectives. Backgrounds are not additive in this way. The experience of depth is, rather, “a view . . . from which my own perspective is felt to deviate.”²⁵ The perception of depth anticipates a perspective from which my actual angle of vision is felt to deviate. Percep-

tion thus closes into itself *as* actuality, a norm it cannot in fact instantiate. Perception *is* anticipatory and normative. The only thing Kelly omits is how the perception of depth is also one in which “I feel myself looked at by things,” in which my activity of perception “is equally a passivity.” That theme has consequences for contemporary politics.

Perception and Discipline

It might still seem that the gap between Michel Foucault and Merleau-Ponty remains too large to enable either to illuminate the other. Did not the early Foucault argue that because of the opacity of “life, labor and language” the structure of experience cannot provide a solid base from which to redeem a theory of the subject? Did he not say that the transcendental arguments that phenomenologists seek — whereby you first locate something indubitable in experience and then show what conception of the subject is necessarily presupposed by that experience — cannot be stabilized when the “doubles” of life, labor, and language fade into obscurity? Yes. But those strictures may be more applicable to Husserl than to Merleau-Ponty, particularly regarding the latter’s later work.

Foucault speaks of “discipline” as a political anatomy of detail that molds the posture, demeanor, and sensibilities of the constituencies subjected to it, “in which power relations have an immediate hold on [the body]; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to enact signs.”²⁶ We note already a difference in rhythm between the sentences of Foucault and those of Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty’s sentences convey an implicit sense of belonging to the world, while Foucault’s often identify or mobilize elements of resistance and disaffection circulating within modern modalities of experience. The initial connection between these two thinkers across their differences is that both see how perception requires a prior *disciplining* of the senses in which a rich history of inter-involvement sets the stage for experience. The critical relation between corporeo-cultural discipline and the shape of experience is emphasized by the fact that adults who have the neural machinery of vision repaired after having been blind from birth remain operationally blind unless and until a new history of inter-involvements between movement, touch, and object manipulation is synthesized into the synapses of the visual system. Only about ten percent of the synaptic

connections for vision are wired in at birth. The rest emerge from the interplay between body/brain pluripotentiality and the history of inter-sensory experience.²⁷

Let's return to Merleau-Ponty's finding that to perceive depth is implicitly to feel yourself as an object of vision. In a disciplinary society this implicit sense morphs into a more intensive experience of being an actual or potential object of *surveillance* in a national security state. That latter experience was amplified in the United States after the Al Qaeda attack of 9/11, the event in which Osama bin Laden invited George W. Bush to organize the world through the prism of security against a pervasive, nonstate enemy, an invitation that the cowboy eagerly accepted. The indubitable experience of self-visibility now swells into that of being an object of surveillance. Everyday awareness of that possibility recoils back upon the shape and emotional tone of experience. Methods and devices for tracking and surveilling people now include airport-screening devices, the circulation of social security numbers, credit profiles, medical records, electric identification bracelets, telephone caller ID services, product surveys, NSA sweeps, telephone records, license plates, internet use profiles, IRS audits, driver's licenses, police phone calls for "contributions," credit card numbers, DNA records, fingerprints, smellprints, eyeprints, promotion and hiring profiles, drug tests, and traffic, street, and building surveillance cameras. These are used, for example, at work, in schools, on the streets, and for voter solicitations, job interviews, police scrutiny, prison observations, political paybacks, racial profiling, e-mail solicitations, church judgments, divorce proceedings, and the publication of sexual proclivities. As such methods and devices proliferate, the experience of *potential* observability becomes an active element in everyday experience.²⁸

A whole problematic then develops: that of an architecture that is no longer built simply to be seen, . . . or to observe the external space, . . . but to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control—to render visible those who are inside it . . . an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them.²⁹

True, Foucault's description of disciplinary society does not deal adequately with differences in age, class, and race. There is today an urban

underclass that is subjected to general strategies of urban *containment* and impersonal modes of *surveillance* in stores, streets, public facilities, reform schools, prisons, and schools. There is also a suburban, upper-middle, career-oriented class enmeshed in detailed disciplines in several domains, anticipating the day it rises above them. And there are several other subject positions too, including those who rise more or less above generalized surveillance.

Watch out. Are you a war dissenter? Gay? Interested in drugs? An atheist who talks about it? A critic of the war on terrorism, drug policies, or government corruption? Sexually active? Be careful. You may want a new job someday or to protect yourself against this or that charge. Protect yourself now in anticipation of uncertain possibilities in the future. Discipline yourself in response to future threats. In advanced capitalism, where the affluent organize life around the prospect of a long career, many others look for jobs without security or benefits, and yet others find themselves stuck in illegal, informal, and underground economies, the implicit message of the surveillance society is to remain unobtrusive and politically quiescent by appearing more devout, regular, and patriotic than the next guy. The implicit sense of belonging to the world that Merleau-Ponty found folded into the fiber of experience now begins to ripple and scatter.

Neither Foucault nor Merleau-Ponty, understandably, was as alert to the electronic media as we must be today. This ubiquitous force flows into the circuits of discipline, perception, self-awareness, and conduct. It is not enough to survey the pattern of media ownership. It is equally pertinent to examine the methods through which it becomes insinuated into the shape and tone of perception.

Here I note one dimension of a larger topic. To decode electoral campaigns it is useful to see how media advertising works. According to Robert Heath, a successful ad executive and follower of recent work in neuroscience, the most effective product ads target viewers who are distracted from them. The ad solicits "implicit learning" below the level of refined intellectual attention. It plants "triggers" that insinuate a mood or an association into perception, which are called into action the next time the product is seen, mentioned, smelled, heard, or touched. Implicit learning is key because, unlike the refined intellectual activity into which it flows, "it is on all the time." It is "automatic, almost inexhaustible, in its capacity and more durable" in retention.³⁰

The link to Foucault and Merleau-Ponty is that they too attend to the preconscious, affective dimensions of discipline and experience without focusing upon the media. Today, programs such as *Hannity & Colmes*, *Crossfire*, and *The O'Reilly Factor* infiltrate the tonalities of political perception. As viewers focus on points made by guests and hosts, the program is laced with interruptions, people talking over one another, sharp accusations, and yelling. The endless reiteration of those intensities secretes a simple standard of objectivity as the gold standard of perception while insinuating the corollary suspicion that no one actually measures up to it. As a result resentment and cynicism now become coded into the very color of perception. The cumulative result of the process itself favors a neoconservative agenda. For cynics typically ridicule the legacy of big government in employment, services, and welfare while yearning for a figure to reassert the unquestionable authority of "the nation." A cynic is an authoritarian who rejects the current regime of authority. Cynical realists experience the fragility and uncertainty that help to constitute perception. But they join to that experience an overweening demand for authority, and they accuse everyone else of failing to conform to the model of simple objectivity they claim to meet. Justification of this model is not sustained by showing how they meet it but by repeated accusations that others regularly fail to do so.

Cynical realism is one response to the complexity of perception. Another, in a world of surveillance, is self-depoliticization. You avert your gaze from disturbing events to curtail dangerous temptations to action. The goal is to avoid close attention or intimidation in the venues of work, family, school, church, electoral politics, and neighborhood life. But, of course, such a retreat can also amplify a feeling of resentment against the organization of life itself, opening up some of these same constituencies for recruitment by the forces of resentment. Such responses can be mixed in several ways. What is undeniable is that the circuits between discipline, media, layered memories, and self-awareness find expression in the color of perception itself. Power is coded into perception.

The Micropolitics of Perception

Sensory inter-involvement, disciplinary processes, detailed modes of surveillance, media infiltration, congealed attractors, affective dispositions, self-regulation in response to future susceptibility—these elements par-

ticipate in perpetual circuits of exchange, feedback, and reentry, with each loop folding another variation and degree into its predecessor. The imbrications are so close that it is impossible to sort out each element from the other once they have merged into a larger complex. The circuits fold, bend, and blend into each other, inflecting the shape of political experience. Even as they are ubiquitous, however, there are numerous points of dissonance, variation, hesitation, and disturbance in them. These interruptions provide potential triggers to the pursuit of other spiritual possibilities, where the term "spirit" means a refined state of the body in an individual *and* those existential dispositions that are embedded in institutional practices.

What are the dissonances? In the following formulations the "you form" can be taken in both its singular and plural forms. A past replete with religious ritual clashes with an alternative representation of God in a film, church, or school; an emergent practice of heterodox sexuality encourages you to question established habits in other domains; the interruption of a heretofore smooth career path solicits doubts previously submerged in habits of anticipation; a trip abroad exposes you to disturbing news items and attitudes seldom allowed expression in your own country; neurotherapy fosters a modest shift in your sensibility; a stock market crash disrupts assumptions about the future; a new religious experience shakes you; a terrorist attack folds an implacable desire for revenge into you; a devastating natural event shakes your faith in providence.

The anticipatory habits of perception are not self-contained. Rather, dominant tendencies of the day periodically bump into minor dispositions, submerged tendencies, and wavering incipencies. The instability of the attractors and conjunctions that make perception possible thus also make it a ubiquitous medium of power and politics.

What might be done today to open the anticipatory habits and sedimented dispositions of more constituencies during a time when media politics diverts attention from the most urgent dilemmas of the day?

Television could be a site upon which to run such experiments. A few dramas do so. I would place *Six Feet Under* on that list, as it disrupts conventional habits of perception and occasionally works to recast them. But the closer a program is to a "news program" or a "talk show," the more it either enacts virulent partisanship, adopts the hackneyed voice of simple objectivity, or purports to do the one while doing the other. What is

needed are subtle media experiments, news and talk shows that expose and address the complexity of experience in a media-saturated society. *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* take a couple of steps in the right direction, calling into question the voice of simple objectivity through exaggeration and satirization of it. Their stills and close-ups of public figures in action reveal how passions infiltrate our perceptual experience below the level of conscious attention. But because we live in a media-saturated society much more is needed.

Mark Hansen, in *New Philosophy for New Media*, pursues this issue. In chapter 6, he reviews *Skulls*, an exhibit presented by Robert Lazzarini at the Whitney Museum in 2000. Lazzarini's sculptures are uncanny. They seem like skulls, but you soon find that, however you tilt your head or change your position, it is impossible to vindicate the anticipation of them. Lazzarini has in fact laser-scanned an actual human skull, reformatted it into several images, and constructed a few statues from the reformatted images. These three-dimensional images cannot be brought into alignment with the anticipations triggered by their appearances. "At each effort to align your point of view with the perspective of one of these weird sculptural objects, you experience a gradually mounting feeling of incredible strangeness. *It is as though these skulls refuse to return your gaze.*"³¹

The anticipation of being seen by the objects you see is shattered by these deformed images that refuse to support that sense. You now feel "the space around you begin to ripple, to bubble, to infold, as if it were becoming unstuck from the fixed coordinates of its three dimensional extension."³² The exhibit *Skulls*, when joined to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, heightens awareness of the fugitive role we play in perception by making it impossible to find an attractor to which it corresponds. These sculptures also dramatize the role that *affect* plays in perception, as they jolt the tacit feeling of belonging to the world that Merleau-Ponty imports into the depth grammar of experience. The implicit sense of belonging to the world is transfigured into a feeling of vertigo. Do such experiments dramatize a sense of disruption already lurking within experience in a world marked by the acceleration of tempo, the exacerbation of surveillance, and the disturbance of traditional images of time? At a minimum, in conjunction with the work of Merleau-Ponty and Foucault, they sharpen our awareness of the multiple inter-involvements between affect,

memory, and tactility in the organization of perception. You now more readily call into question simple models of vision and better appreciate how a disciplinary society inflects affect-imbued perception.

You might even become attracted to experimental strategies to deepen visceral attachment to the complexity of existence itself during a time when the automatic sense of belonging to this world is often stretched and disrupted. None of the above responses is automatic. An opportunity merely opens. Pursuing it requires moving back and forth between perceptual experimentation and reflection on changes in the larger circumstances of life that enter into affect-imbued judgments and perceptions.

As a preliminary to the latter, consider some processes and conditions that disrupt the tacit sense of belonging to the world that Merleau-Ponty found sedimented in the pores of experience itself. They include: the acceleration of speed and expansion of scope in many domains of life, including military deployment, global communication systems, air travel, tourism, population migrations, fashion, financial transactions, and cultural exchanges; a flood of popular films that complicate visual experience and sometimes call the linear image of time into question; publicity about new discoveries in neuroscience, which include attention to that half-second delay between multisensory reception and the organization of perception; greater awareness of work in the sciences of complexity that transduct the Newtonian model of linear cause into the ideas of resonance and emergent causality; scientific speculations that extend the creative element already discernible in biological evolution to the unfolding of the universe itself; increased media attention to events that periodically shock habitual assumptions coded into perception; media attention to the devastation occasioned here or there by earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis; and a vague but urgent sense that the world's fragile ecological balance is careening into radical imbalance.

The signs that these disruptive experiences have taken a toll are also diverse. They include, on the revenge or aggressive side of life, the extreme levels of violence and superhuman heroism in "action" films, as they strive to redeem simple models of objectivism and mastery under unfavorable circumstances; the intensification of accusatory voices in the media in conjunction with the righteous self-assertion by talking heads of simple objectivism; new intensities of apocalyptic prophecy in several religious

movements; the heightened virulence of electoral campaigns; and a popular desire for abstract revenge that finds ample expression in preemptive wars, state regimes of torture, massacres, collective rapes, and the like.

The obverse side of those responses is discernible as well in other practices and constituencies. Today more people in a variety of social positions—including those of class, age, formal religious faith, gender, and ethnicity—are less convinced than heretofore of the simple model of perception. They seek to consolidate attachment to a world populated by sensory inter-involvements, resonance, attractors, the complexity of duration, time as becoming, and an uncertain future. Take, as merely one sign of these developments, the receptive responses of many to minor films such as *Far from Heaven*, *I ♥ Huckabees*, *Time Code*, *Blow-Up*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Memento*, *Waking Life*, *Run Lola Run*, and *Synecdoche*.

These films focus on the role of duration in perception, scramble old habits in this way or that, highlight sensory inter-involvements, challenge simple objectivism, and call into question self-confidence in the linear image of time. Some take another turn as well. Going through and beyond the anxiety fomented by *Skulls*, they encourage a spiritual awakening—either theistic or nontheistic in form—that is most apt to emerge *after* such anxieties have been tapped. To take one example, *Waking Life* is a long cartoon consisting of wavy, undulating figures. It charts the layering of memory into the existential orientations in a man whose brain, it turns out, is alive and active for six minutes after he has died in other respects. He is filled with a muddle of affect-imbued memories, some profound and others silly, about the point of existence. He is compelled to let these diverse memories speak to each other in this instance because the link between perception and action has been severed. He thus dwells in action-suspended experience because he is unable to do anything else. Here a high-tech cartoon, composed of uncertain and indistinct figures, poses issues about what it takes to be attached to a fast-paced world in which the connecting strings have become stretched. This film invites us to probe and renew attachment to a world increasingly disjoined from the pace of life tacitly assumed by Merleau-Ponty. We are moved to cultivate further strains of attachment to this world and to fend off the seed of abstract resentment that so readily rises up in and around us. And we are invited to ponder how embers of existential resentment, once sown, can be inflamed

by disruptive events, media frenzies, and political campaigns, and how it then becomes infused into institutional practices such as investment, consumption, church assemblies, media reporting, voting patterns, and state priorities. An incipient sense of care for this world is tapped and amplified, a sense that can either be ignored or worked upon further by tactical means and micropolitics.³³

This is the juncture at which to address the engagements by Deleuze in *Cinema II* with those features of late-modern life that disrupt belief in this world as well as his accentuation of other, more subtle strategies which reactivate it. The stage is set by explorations of flashbacks that expose strange moments of bifurcation in experience, comedic figures who enact exquisite sensitivity to “aberrant” movements of world, irrational cuts that scramble the action image, crystals of time that enact the complexity of duration, and engagements with “powers of the false” that open up dissonant traces of experience typically superseded by resolute calls to action. The suggestion is that most of us have already been infected by such experiences both in the vicissitudes of daily life I listed earlier and by films that dramatize and extend them. Several of them dramatize seeds of attachment to this world that can then be amplified further.

Such dramatizations can, of course, themselves trigger existential resentment, magnetize drives to reassert the simple model of objectivity, or encourage retreats from public engagement. Especially if you are occupied by a prior sense that we humans are somehow entitled to a world of simple objectivity. But Deleuze challenges these responses at the nodal points of their reception because they incite revenge against the world as such. He encourages tactics to deepen attachment to the complexity of “this world,” so as to challenge bellicose mastery, passive skepticism, and authoritarian cynicism at their nodal points of formation. He contends that commitment to radical political agendas that go beyond negative critique require expansive surges of positive existential attachment.

By “belief in this world” Deleuze certainly does not mean the established distribution of power and political priorities. Those are the things to resist and overcome with positive alternatives. He means, in the first instance, affirmation of the largest compass of being in which human beings are set as opposed to existential resentment of it or resignation about it. He means, in the second instance, acceptance without resentment of the fact that in a mobile world composed of minorities of multiple

types, *numerous constituencies we encounter on a regular basis increasingly bring different final conceptions of the world to experience as such*. The agenda is to connect positive attachment to this world as we interpret it to presumptive acceptance of the fact that, during an age when minoritization of the world is proceeding at a faster pace, we increasingly bump into people who adopt different final interpretations of the largest compass of being as such. As he puts it in one instance, "Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, we need reasons to believe in this world."³⁴ The idea seems to be, again, to consolidate attachment to this world as we ourselves interpret it to be and to overcome the tendency to resent the veritable minoritization of the world that is taking place at a faster pace today.

In his usage the term "belief" functions on more than one register. There are epistemic beliefs, some of which can be altered relatively easily by recourse to new evidence and argument. And there are more intense, vague existential dispositions in which creed and affect mix together below the ready reach of change by reflective considerations alone. This is the zone that prophets tap. It is one the media engages too through the interplay of rhythm, image, music, and sound. "Belief" at this level touches, for instance, the tightening of the gut, coldness of the skin, contraction of the pupils, and hunching of the back that occur when a judgment or faith in which you are deeply invested is contested, ridiculed, ruled illegal, or punished more severely yet. It also touches those feelings of abundance and joy that emerge whenever we sense the surplus of life over the structure of our identities. That is the surplus Deleuze seeks to mobilize and to attach to positive political movements that embrace minoritization of the world. It may be surprising to some to hear an immanent naturalist embrace the spiritual dimension of life. But it is not surprising to those of us who at once contest faith in transcendence in the strongest sense of that word and appreciate the profound role that the quality of spirituality plays in public life.

It may be important to follow Deleuze's lead in part because the mode of belonging embraced by Merleau-Ponty has been shaken by the acceleration of pace in many zones of culture and the pervasive role of the media in everyday life.³⁵ And in part because various efforts to ground care for difference only in the experience of the negative or vulnerability are not apt to succeed unless they are themselves situated in a prior experience of

the vitality of being. At the very least they do not have that much to show for themselves to date.

Wider negotiation of attachment to the most fundamental terms of existence would not sanction existing injustices, nor would it *suffice* to generate the critical politics needed today — though some will predictably project both assumptions into this essay. Such energies, rather, must simultaneously be cultivated by individuals, mobilized in various institutions of associational life, and inserted into larger circuits of political action. For we no longer inhabit a world where a sense of belonging is securely installed in the infrastructure of experience, if we ever did. Nor is a single religious faith apt to repair the deficit on its terms alone, at least without introducing massive repression during a time when minorities of many types inhabit the same territorial space. The issue is fundamental.

Let's tarry on the question of existential ethos a bit. My experience is that many on the democratic left who point correctly to the *insufficiency* of such awakenings move quickly from that point to assert its *irrelevance* or to announce its *foolishness*. They do not want to seem soft or feminine. They fear that the nerve of critique will be severed if ontological affirmation is pursued. Indeed, some seem to assume that a healthy *resentment* of suffering, inequality, and closure cannot be advanced if you also affirm a positive existential spirituality. Sometimes they assume as well that to drop theism in favor of any version of materialism *means* to forfeit or go beyond spirituality. Those are the judgments I seek to contest. I suggest that Friedrich Nietzsche, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze are with me on this point, each showing how a spirituality of some sort or other is always infused into experience, interpretation, and action and all seeking to draw sustenance from positive attachment to this world. Today, work on the infrastructure of perception is linked to the possibility of positive politics. To ignore the first is to give too much ground to prophets of revenge or despair as they work to insert a spirituality of existential revenge into the pores of experience and as they identify vulnerable targets upon whom to vent the intensities they mobilize. Ontological affirmation, the democratic left, and political militancy belong together in the late-modern era. It takes all three in tandem — in their theistic and nontheistic forms — to press for pluralism, equality, and ecological sensitivity.

In this essay I have begun to chart reverberations between existential

seeds, the subtle organization of perception, social practices of surveillance, the acceleration of pace in several zones of life, the expansion of minorities of multiple types, the critical role of the media in the politics of perception, the place of spirituality in perception and other aspects of institutional life, and the pertinence of all of these to a militant politics of the democratic left. Each site and dimension demands more reflection and experimentation in relation to the others.

Notes

- 1 You could speak, as Merleau-Ponty occasionally does, of transcendence without the Transcendent. But such a formulation may blur a contestation between alternative faiths or philosophies that needs to be kept alive.
- 2 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis, 1987), 266.
- 3 In their introduction to *Problems and Methods in The Study of Politics*, the editors, Ian Shapiro, Rogers M. Smith, and Tarek E. Masoud, report me as saying that "the world is in a state of constant and unpredictable flux" (11). That signifies to me that awareness of one side of my position has been blocked by the shock of meeting the other.
- 4 Prigogine, *Is the Future Given?*, 65.
- 5 Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 206.
- 6 The formulation in fact suggests the doctrine of parallelism introduced by Spinoza in the seventeenth century. For a fine study in neuroscience that draws upon both Spinoza's philosophy of parallelism and his idea that affect always accompanies perception, belief, and thinking, see Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza*.
- 7 See Ramachandran, *Phantoms in the Brain*. Some implications of this research for cultural theory are explored in Connolly, *NeuroPolitics*, chap. 1.
- 8 Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 152.
- 9 See, besides the references to works by Damasio, Prigogine, and Ramachandran above, Goodwin, *How the Leopard Changed Its Spots*. In *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, Stephen Jay Gould emphasizes how close his revision of Darwinian theory is to the notion of genealogy developed by Nietzsche.
- 10 Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 156.
- 11 The phrase, "the half-second delay" comes out of work in neuroscience pioneered by Benjamin Libet. Merleau-Ponty was certainly aware of a time lag, however. An excellent discussion of the delay and its significance can be found in Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*.
- 12 Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 100.
- 13 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 52.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 100.

- 15 This theme is increasingly accepted in neuroscience today. See Durie, "Doors of Perception." Durie agrees, too, that the senses are interinvolved.
- 16 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, chap. 3, "The Memory of Touch."
- 17 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 183. Such a pattern of inter-involvement will seem impossible only to those who are captured by the analytic-synthetic dichotomy, in which every connection is reducible either to a definitional or an empirical (causal) relation. Once you break that dichotomy, you can come to terms with the series of memory-infused inter-involvements through which perception is organized. You are also able to consider models of causality that transcend efficient causality.
- 18 Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia, *Mirrors in the Brain*, 125. Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia think that language would not have developed without this base of pre-linguistic experience enabled by the cultural coding of mirror neurons. (I am aware that the word "linguistic" can be stretched to include such processes, but the value in not doing so is to help us understand how language evolved out of cultural experience rather than popping up all at once and to appreciate more closely the multilayered character of experience.) Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia also sprinkle their book with quotations from Merleau-Ponty, appreciating numerous points at which his observational experiments support their phenomenological work. One point at which Merleau-Ponty's work suggests a modest revision to me, however, is that it points to the way that tactics of the self and media micropolitics help to code seeds of cultural experience by means of multimedia that exceed the ready reach of intellectual self-consciousness. He draws us, then, into political territory mapped by Foucault and Deleuze.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 20 Soló and Goodwin, *Signs of Life*, 142-43.
- 21 In fact, Henri Bergson is better than Merleau-Ponty at focusing attention on the role that the imperative to make perceptual judgments rapidly as one runs through the numerous encounters of everyday life plays in creating the subtractions and simplifications of operational perception. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the comparative advantages and weaknesses of each perspective. But if I were to do so, the above limitation in Merleau-Ponty would be balanced against his reflective appreciation of the numerous sensory "inter-involvements" that make perception possible. The starting point to engage Bergson on these issues is *Matter and Memory*.
- 22 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 219, my italics.
- 23 Coole, *Negativity and Politics*, 132. This book prompted me to take another look at Merleau-Ponty in relation to Foucault and Deleuze. Some will protest her assertion, saying that priority must be given either to the subject or to the object. But they then have to come to terms with the multiple inter-involvements elucidated by Merleau-Ponty and his judgment that you can't

- unsort entirely—once these mixings and remixings have occurred—exactly what contribution is made by one “side” or “the other.” Even the painter, alert to his powers of perception, is not “able to say (since the distinction has no meaning) what comes from him and what comes from things, what the new work adds to the old ones, or what it has taken from the others.” “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” 58–59.
- 24 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, 13, my italics. That text also deepens our experience of “the flesh” in ways which extend all the points made about the sensorium discussed above. But we cannot pursue that pregnant topic here.
- 25 Kelly, “Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty,” 86 and 92.
- 26 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 25.
- 27 For a review of the neuroscience literature on bodily and cultural elements in the formation of sight, see Zeman, *Consciousness*, chaps. 5 and 6.
- 28 In April of 2005, *The Johns Hopkins Gazette* released the following bulletin: “Continuing its efforts to enhance the security of students, faculty and staff, the university has installed a state of the art closed-circuit TV system. The system can be programmed to look for as many as 16 behavior patterns and to assign them a priority score for operator follow-up. . . . The cameras are helping us to make the transition to a more fully integrated ‘virtual policing’ system.”
- 29 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 172.
- 30 Heath, *The Hidden Power of Advertising*, 67. Heath is not speaking of subliminal inserts here; he is talking about advertisements that distract attention from themselves and encourage viewers to be distracted too as the advertisements insert connections between affect, words, and images.
- 31 Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, 198.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 It is pertinent to emphasize that the “attachment to this world” spoken of here is not to existing injustices, class suffering, dogmatism, repression of diversity, and the like but to the human existential condition itself as it finds expression in a world in which some zones of life proceed at a more rapid tempo. The wager is that the enhancement of attachment to this world increases the energy and will to oppose the dangers and injustices built into it.
- 34 Deleuze, *Cinema II, The Time Image*, 172.
- 35 I review specific strategies, both individual and collective, to rework tacit dispositions to perception and sensibility in chapters 4, 5, and 6 of *Neuropolitics* and in “Experience and Experiment.”

Rosi Braidotti

The Politics of “Life Itself” and New Ways of Dying

This essay focuses on contemporary debates on the politics of life itself, with special emphasis on the shifting boundaries between life and death. As a starting assumption, I want to suggest here that we understand biopower not only in the sense of the government of the living but also with relation to practices of dying. By extension, this means that our relationship to pain, loss, and practices of mourning needs to be reconsidered in the light of biopolitical concerns.

Generally speaking, “the politics of life itself” refers to the extent to which the notion of biopower has emerged as an organizing principle for the proliferating discourses and practices that make technologically mediated “life” into a self-constituting entity.¹ Living matter itself becomes the subject and not the object of inquiry, and this shift toward a biocentered perspective affects the very fiber and structure of social subjects.² One of the manifestations of this materialist shift toward what could be called a genetic social imaginary is the changing roles and representations of the human body.³ As a result of information and biogenetic technologies, bodily materialism is being revised in ways that challenge accepted social constructivist notions. The matter of the body and the specific materiality of bodies have come to the fore with more prominence, for example, in stem-cell research and

in everyday media-driven dissemination of “gene-centric” images and representations. Contemporary social and cultural examples of this shift are practices linked to genetic citizenship as a form of spectatorship, for instance, the visualizations of the life of genes in medical practices, popular culture, cinema, and advertising. Another social aspect to this trend concerns the uses of genetics in political debates on race, ethnicity, and immigration. Yet another example is the rhetoric of “life” or living matter in public debates from abortion and stem-cell research to new kinship and family structures. This development pertains to a trend that is becoming known as neovitalism and vital politics.⁴ Considering the problematic nature of vitalism in European thought and modern history, in view of its link with the organicist philosophies of fascism, I shall not pursue it further in this essay.

The Current Situation

These social discourses about “life” are often taken as indicating the return of “real bodies” and real materiality: an ontology of presence after so much postmodernist deconstruction. I refer to this return of a neorealist practice of bodily materialism as *matter-ialism*, or radical neomaterialism. This trend has caused both the neoliberal⁵ and the neo-Kantian thinkers to be struck by high levels of anxiety about the sheer thinkability of the human future.⁶ Technology is central to this matter-ialistic debate.

Claudia Springer argues, for instance, that this discourse celebrating the union of humans and electronic technology is currently circulating with equal success among the scientific community and in popular culture.⁷ It can therefore be seen and, to a certain extent, dismissed today as a dominant mode of representation. The work of Donna Haraway is of seminal importance here. The cyborg as a technologically enhanced body-machine is the dominant social and discursive figuration for the interaction between the human and the technological in postindustrial societies. It is also a living or active, materially embedded cartography of the kind of power-relations that are operative in the postindustrial social sphere. Scott Bukatman argues that this projection of the physical self into an artificial environment feeds into a dream of terminal identity outside the body, a sort of “cybersubject” that feeds into the New Age fantasies of

cosmic redemption through technology.⁸ New Age spirituality or technomysticism form part of this trend.

This affects the question of death and makes possible new ways of dying. A rather complex relationship has emerged in the cyber universe we inhabit: one in which the link between the flesh and the machine is symbiotic and therefore can best be described as a bond of mutual dependence. This engenders some significant paradoxes when it comes to the human body. The corporeal site of subjectivity is simultaneously denied, in a fantasy of escape, and strengthened or reinforced. Anne Balsamo stresses the paradoxical concomitance of effects surrounding the new posthuman bodies as enabling a fantastic dream of immortality and control over life and death. “And yet, such beliefs about the technological future “life” of the body are complemented by a palpable fear of death and annihilation from uncontrollable and spectacular body-threats: antibiotic-resistant viruses, random contamination, flesh-eating bacteria.”⁹

In other words, the new practices of “life” mobilize not only generative forces but also new and subtler degrees of extinction. This type of vitality, unconcerned by clear-cut distinctions between living and dying, composes the notion of *zoē* as a nonhuman yet affirmative life-force. This vitalist materialism has nothing in common with the postmodern emphasis on the inorganic and the aesthetics of fake, pastiche, and camp simulation. It also moves beyond “high” cyber studies, into post-cyber-materialism.

Through these practices, the traditional humanistic unity of the embodied human is dislocated by a number of social forces, driven by the convergence of information, communication, and biotechnologies.¹⁰ This engenders a variety of social practices of extended, fragmented, enhanced, or prosthetically empowered embodiment. In my previous work on nomadic political and feminist theory, I have extensively analyzed this phenomenon, which I do not assess necessarily in a negative mode. In this essay, I want to test the hypothesis that the emphasis on life itself has some positive sides because it focuses with greater accuracy on the complexities of contemporary technologically mediated bodies and on social practices of human embodiment.

This marks a shift away from anthropocentrism, in favor of a new emphasis on the mutual interdependence of material, biocultural, and

symbolic forces in the making of social and political practices. The focus on life itself may encourage a sort of biocentered egalitarianism,¹¹ forcing a reconsideration of the concept of subjectivity in terms of “life-forces.” It dislocates but also redefines the relationship between self and other by shifting the axes of genderization, racialization, and naturalization away from a binary opposition into a more complex and less oppositional mode of interaction. Biopolitics thus opens up an ecophilosophical dimension of reflection and inaugurates alternative ecologies of belonging both in kinship systems and in forms of social and political participation. I would like to explore the possibility that these “hybrid” social identities and the new modes of multiple belonging they enact may constitute the starting point for mutual and respective accountability and pave the way for an ethical regrouping of social participation and community building.

I would like, in other words, to defend the politics of “life itself” as a form of active ethical citizenship. Social examples of biocitizenship as a technology of the self are the emphasis currently placed on the responsibility for the self-management of one’s health and one’s own lifestyle in the case of medical insurance, or the social drive toward eternal youth, which is linked to the suspension of time in globally mediated societies and can be juxtaposed to euthanasia and other social practices of assisted death. Also relevant to this discussion are contemporary embodied social practices that are often pathologized: addictions, eating disorders, and melancholia, ranging from burnout to states of apathy or disaffection. I want to approach these phenomena in a nonnormative manner as social manifestations of the shifting relation between living and dying in the era of the politics of “life itself.”

Biopower Revisited

Issues of power and power relations are central to this project. The notion of “life itself” lies at the heart of biogenetic capitalism as a site of financial investments and potential profit.¹² Technological interventions neither suspend nor automatically improve the social relations of exclusion and inclusion that historically had been predicated along the axes of class and socioeconomics, as well as along the sexualized and racialized lines of demarcation of “otherness.” Also denounced as “biopiracy,” the ongoing technological revolution often intensifies patterns of traditional discrimi-

nation and exploitation.¹³ We have all become the subjects of biopower, but we differ considerably in the degrees and modes of actualization of that very power.

This has three major consequences: the first is conceptual and, as I anticipated earlier, focuses on the more negative aspects of the politics of “life itself,” namely, the new practices of dying in contemporary society. “Life” can be a threatening force, which engenders new epidemics and environmental catastrophes, blurring the distinction between the natural and the cultural dimensions. Another obvious example of the politics of death is the new forms of warfare and specifically terrorists’ use of suicide bombers. Equally significant are the changes that have occurred in the political practice of bearing witness to the dead as a form of activism, from the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo to the Chechnya war widows. From a posthuman perspective, there is also the proliferation of viruses that travel back and forth between humans and animals—and between computers and other digital devices through the internet. Relevant cultural practices that reflect this changing status of death can be traced in the success of forensic detectives in contemporary popular culture. The corpse is a daily presence in global media and journalistic news, while it is also an object of entertainment. The dislocation of gender roles in relation to death and killing is reflected in the image of women who kill, from recent stage productions of *Medea* and *Hecuba* to the character of Lara Croft. It might also be interesting to analyze the currency granted to both legal and illegal drugs in contemporary culture, which blurs the boundaries between self-destruction and fashionable behavior and forces a reconsideration of what is the value of “life itself.”

The second consequence concerns the status of social and political theory itself. It is urgent to assess the state of the theoretical debates on biopower after Foucault, especially in terms of its legal, political, and ethical implications. Several positions have emerged in recent biopower research. Some thinkers stress the role of moral accountability as a form of biopolitical citizenship, thus inscribing the notion of “life” as “*bios*,” that is to say, an instance of governmentality that is as empowering as it is confining.¹⁴ This school of thought locates the political moment in the relational and self-regulating accountability of a bioethical subject and results in the radicalization of the project of modernity.

The second grouping takes its lead from Heidegger and is best ex-

emplified by Giorgio Agamben.¹⁵ It defines “*bios*” as the result of the intervention of sovereign power as that which is capable of reducing the subject to “bare life,” that is to say “*zoē*.” The being-aliveness of the subject (*zoē*) is identified with its perishability, its propensity and vulnerability to death and extinction. Biopower here means Thanatos-politics and results, among others, in the indictment of the project of modernity.

A third important group is formed by feminist, environmentalist, and race theorists who have addressed the shifting status of “difference” in advanced capitalism in a manner that respects the complexity of social relations and critiques liberalism, while highlighting the specificity of a gender and race approach.¹⁶ These critical thinkers approach biopolitical analyses from the angle of the greed and ruthless exploitation that marks contemporary globalized capitalism. The notion of biopiracy is significant in this respect.¹⁷

A fourth significant community of scholars works within a Spinozist framework and includes Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Edouard Glissant, Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, Etienne Balibar, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and myself.¹⁸ The emphasis falls on the politics of life itself as a relentlessly generative force. This requires an interrogation of the shifting interrelations between human and nonhuman forces. The latter are defined both as inhuman and posthuman.¹⁹

The third consequence is methodological. If it is indeed the case that all technologies have a strong “biopower” effect, in that they affect bodies and immerse them in social and legal relations of power, then a higher degree of interdisciplinary effort is needed in social and political thought to come to terms with our historical predicament. This challenge requires a methodology that focuses on processes and interconnections. Moreover, the speed of transformations induced by technology displaces established conventions of thought and moral certainties. In culture at large, technological changes are received with a mixture of fascination and horror, euphoria and anxiety.²⁰ This raises serious ethical issues. I would like to assess the hypothesis that, far from being merely a “crisis” of values, this historical situation presents us with new opportunities. Renewed conceptual creativity and a leap of the social imaginary may be needed in order to meet the challenge. I want to explore accordingly a postanthropocentric approach to the analysis of “life itself” as a way of broadening the sense of community. Examples of this are the new global environmentalism, which

assesses allegedly “natural” catastrophes as an interesting hybrid mix of cultural and political forces. Also significant to this discussion is the return of evolutionary discourses in contemporary social theory, as is the revival of a vitalist Spinozist political theory. The state of the debates on these issues in fields as diverse as political, legal, social, environmental, feminist, and technology theories, to name just a few, shows a range of positions that need to be assessed critically. This essay aims to elaborate sets of criteria for a new social and political theory that steers a course between humanistic nostalgia and neoliberal euphoria about biocapitalism. Social and political practices that take life itself as the point of reference need not aim at the restoration of unitary norms or the celebration of the master-narrative of global profit, but rather at social cohesion, the respect for diversity, and sustainable growth. At the heart of this project lies an ethics that respects vulnerability while actively constructing social horizons of hope.

The Emergence of *Zoē*

Life is half animal, *zoē* (*zoology*, *zoophilic*, *zoo*) and half discursive, *bios* (*biology*). *Zoē*, of course, is the poor half of a couple that foregrounds *bios* defined as intelligent life. Centuries of Christian indoctrination have left a deep mark here. The relationship to animal life, to *zoē* rather than *bios*, constitutes one of those qualitative distinctions upon which Western reason erected its empire. *Bios* is almost holy, *zoē* is certainly gritty. That they intersect in the human body turns the physical self into a contested space and into a political arena. The mind-body dualism has historically functioned as a shortcut through the complexities of this in-between contested zone. One of the most persistent and helpful fictions that is told about human life is its alleged self-evidence, its implicit worth. *Zoē* is always second best, and the idea of life carrying on independent of, even regardless of, and at times in spite of rational control is the dubious privilege attributed to the nonhumans. These cover all of the animal kingdoms as well as the classical “others” of metaphysically based visions of the subject, namely the sexual other (woman) and the ethnic other (the native). In the old regime this used to be called “Nature.”

Traditionally, the self-reflexive control over life is reserved for the humans, whereas the mere unfolding of biological sequences is for the non-

humans. Given that this concept of “the human” was colonized by phallogocentrism, it has come to be identified with male, white, heterosexual, Christian, property-owning, standard-language-speaking citizens. *Zoē* marks the outside of this vision of the subject, in spite of the efforts of evolutionary theory to strike a new relationship to the nonhuman. Contemporary scientific practices have forced us to touch the bottom of some inhumanity that connects to the human precisely in the immanence of its bodily materialism. With the genetic revolution, we can speak of a generalized “becoming infrahuman” of *bios*. The category of “*bios*” has cracked under the strain and has splintered into a web of interconnected “bits-of-life” effects.

With the postmodern collapse of the qualitative divide between the human and his (the gender is no coincidence) others, the deep vitality of the embodied self has resurfaced from under the crust of the old metaphysical vision of the subject. *Zoē*, this obscenity, this life in me, is intrinsic to my being and yet so much “itself” that it is independent of the will, the demands and expectations of the sovereign consciousness. This *zoē* makes me tick and yet escapes the control of the supervision of the self. *Zoē* carries on relentlessly and gets cast out of the holy precinct of the “me” that demands control and fails to obtain it. It thus ends up being experienced as an alien other. Life is experienced as inhuman because it is all too human, obscene because it lives on mindlessly. Are we not baffled by this scandal, this wonder, this *zoē*, that is to say, by an idea of life that exuberantly exceeds *bios* and supremely ignores logos? Are we not in awe of this piece of flesh called our “body,” of this aching meat called our “self” expressing the abject and simultaneously divine potency of life?

Classical philosophy is resolutely on the side of a dialogue with the biological. Nomadic subjectivity is, in contrast, in love with *zoē*. It’s about the posthuman as becoming animal, becoming other, becoming insect — trespassing all metaphysical boundaries. Ultimately, it leads to becoming imperceptible and fading — death being just another time sequence. Some of these “bits-of-life” effects are therefore very closely related to that aspect of life that goes by the name of death, but is nonetheless an integral part of the *bios/zoē* process. The *bios/zoē* compound refers to what was previously known as life by introducing a differentiation internal to this category. By making the notion of life more complex, this distinction implies the no-

tion of multiplicity. This allows for a nonbinary way of positing the relationship between same and other, between different categories of living beings, and ultimately between life and death. The emphasis and hence the mark of “difference” now falls on the “other” of the living body following its humanistic definition: *thanatos* — the dead body, the corpse or spectral other.

Of Limits as Thresholds

One other concern that prompts this essay is the awareness of the vulnerability of many humans, including those who are committed to pursuing change and making a difference. Progressive thinkers are just as human as others, only considerably more mortal. The issue of suffering, pain, and loss raises its disturbing head.

We lost so many of its specimens to dead-end experimentations of the existential, political, sexual, narcotic, or technological kind. Although it is true that we lost as many if not more of our members to the stultifying inertia of the status quo — a sort of generalized “Stepford wives” syndrome — it is nonetheless the case that I have developed an acute awareness of how difficult changes are. This is not meant as a deterrent against them, on the contrary: I think that the current political climate has placed undue emphasis on the risks involved in pursuing social changes, playing ad nauseam the refrain about the death of ideologies. Such a conservative reaction aims at disciplining the citizens and reducing their desire for the “new” to docile and compulsive forms of consumerism. Nothing could be further removed from my project than this approach. I simply want to issue a cautionary note: processes of change and transformation are so important and ever so vital and necessary that they have to be handled with care. The concept of ethical sustainability addresses these complex issues. We have to take pain into account as a major incentive for, and not only an obstacle to, an ethics of changes and transformations. We also need to rethink the knowing subject in terms of affectivity, interrelationality, territories, ecophilosophical resources, locations, and forces. The nomadic ethico-political project focuses on becoming as a pragmatic philosophy that stresses the need to act, to experiment with different modes of constituting subjectivity and different ways of inhabiting our corporeality. Accordingly, nomadic ethics is not about a master theory but

rather about multiple micropolitical modes of daily activism. It is essential to put the “active” back into activism.

Zoē, or life as absolute vitality, however, is not above negativity, and it can hurt. It is always too much for the specific slab of enfleshed existence that single subjects actualize. It is a constant challenge for us to rise to the occasion, to catch the wave of life’s intensities and ride it, exposing the boundaries or limits as we transgress them. We often crack in the process and just cannot take it anymore. The sheer activity of thinking about such intensity is painful: it causes intense strain, psychic unrest, and nervous tension. If thinking were pleasurable, more humans might be tempted to engage in this activity. Accelerations or increased intensities, however, are that which most humans prefer to avoid.

Crucial to this ethics of affirmation or affirmative compassion (as opposed to moral pity) is the concept of limit. For Spinoza-Deleuze the limit is built into the affective definition of subjectivity. Affectivity in fact is what activates an embodied subject, empowering him or her to interact with others. This acceleration of one’s existential speed, or increase of one’s affective temperature, is the dynamic process of becoming. It follows that a subject can think/understand/do/become no more than what he or she can take or sustain within his or her embodied, spatiotemporal coordinates. This deeply positive understanding of the human subject posits built-in, bioorganic limitations.

Thus the ethical challenge, as Nietzsche had recommended, consists in cultivating joyful modes of confronting the overwhelming intensity of *bios-zoē*. This implies approaching the world through affectivity and not cognition: as singularity, force, movement, through assemblages or webs of interconnections with all that lives. The subject is an autopoietic machine, fuelled by targeted perceptions, and it functions as the echoing chamber of *zoē*. This nonanthropocentric view expresses both a profound love for Life as a cosmic force and the desire to depersonalize subjective life-and-death. This is just one life, not *my* life. The life in “me” does not answer to my name: “I” is just passing.

To live intensely and be alive to the nth degree pushes us to the extreme edge of mortality. This has implications for the question of the limits, which are built-in to the very embodied and embedded structure of the subject. The limits are those of one’s endurance — in the double sense of lasting in time and bearing the pain of confronting “Life” as *zoē*. The

ethical subject is one that can bear this confrontation, cracking up a bit but without having its physical or affective intensity destroyed by it. Ethics consists in reworking the pain into a threshold of sustainability, when and if possible: cracking, but holding it, still.

Bios/Zoē Ethics and Thanatos

My understanding of “life” as the *bios-zoē* ethics of sustainable transformations differs considerably from what Giorgio Agamben (1998) calls “bare life” or “the rest” after the humanized “bio-logical” wrapping is taken over.²¹ “Bare life” is that in you which sovereign power can kill: it is the body as disposable matter in the hands of the despotic force of power (*potestas*). Included as necessarily excluded, “bare life” inscribes fluid vitality at the heart of the mechanisms of capture of the state system. Agamben stresses that this vitality, or “aliveness,” however, is all the more mortal for it. This is linked to Heidegger’s theory of Being as deriving its force from the annihilation of animal life.

The position of *zoē* in Agamben’s system is analogous to the role and the location of language in psychoanalytic theory: it is the site of constitution or “capture” of the subject. This “capture” functions by positing — as an a posteriori construction — a prelinguistic dimension of subjectivity which is apprehended as “always already” lost and out of reach. *Zoē* — like the prediscursive in Lacan, the *chora* of Kristeva, and the maternal feminine of Irigaray — becomes for Agamben the ever-receding horizon of an alterity which has to be included as necessarily excluded in order to sustain the framing of the subject in the first place. This introduces finitude as a constitutive element within the framework of subjectivity, which also fuels an affective political economy of loss and melancholia at the heart of the subject.²²

In his important work on the totalitarian edge of regimes of “bio-power,” Agamben perpetuates the philosophical habit, which consists in taking mortality or finitude as the transhistorical horizon for discussions of “life.” This fixation on Thanatos — which Nietzsche criticized over a century ago — is still very present in critical debates today. It often produces a gloomy and pessimistic vision not only of power but also of the technological developments that propel the regimes of biopower. I beg to differ from the habit that favors the deployment of the problem of *bios-zoē*

on the horizon of death or of a liminal state of not-life or in the spectral economy of the never-dead. Instead, I prefer to stress the generative powers of *zoē* and to turn to the Spinozist political ontology defended by Deleuze and Guattari.²³ I propose to extend this positive approach to the discussion of death as well.

Speaking from the position of an embodied and embedded female subject, I find the metaphysics of finitude to be a myopic way of putting the question of the limits of what we call "life." It is not because Thanatos always wins out in the end that it should enjoy such conceptual high status. Death is overrated. The ultimate subtraction is after all only another phase in a generative process. Too bad that the relentless generative powers of death require the suppression of that which is the nearest and dearest to me, namely myself, my own vital being-there. For the narcissistic human subject, as psychoanalysis teaches us, it is unthinkable that Life should go on without my being there. The process of confronting the thinkability of a Life that may not have "me" or any "human" at the center is actually a sobering and instructive process. I see this postanthropocentric shift as the start for an ethics of sustainability that aims at shifting the focus toward the positivity of *zoē*. As Hardt and Negri suggest, Agamben fails to identify the materialist and productive dimension of this concept, making it in fact indifferent.²⁴

The Question of Limits

I want to end this section with the suggestion that one of the reasons why the negative associations linked to pain, especially in relation to political processes of change, are ideologically laden is that it fits in with the logic of claims and compensations which is central to advanced capitalism. This is a form of institutionalized management of the negative that has become quite common also in gender and antiracism politics.

Two more problematic aspects need to be raised as a consequence. The first is that our culture tends to glorify pain by equating it with suffering, and it thus promotes an ideology of compensation. Contemporary culture has encouraged and rewarded a public morality based on the twin principles of claims and compensation. As if legal and financial settlements could constitute the answer to the injury suffered, the pain endured, and

the long-lasting effects of the injustice. Cases that exemplify this trend are the compensation for the Shoah in the sense of restitution of stolen property, artworks, bank deposits; similar claims have been made by the descendants of slaves forcefully removed from Africa to North America,²⁵ and more recently there have been claims for compensation for damages caused by Soviet communism, notably the confiscation of properties across eastern Europe, both from Jewish and other former citizens. A great deal of contemporary mainstream feminism has also moved in the direction of claims and compensation. This makes affirmative ethics of transformation into a struggle against the mainstream. It also makes it appear more counterintuitive than it actually is.

The second problem is the force of habit. Starting from the assumption that a subject is a sedimentation of established habits, these can be seen as patterns of repetitions that consolidate modes of relation and forces of interaction. Habits are the frame within which nonunitary or complex subjects get reterritorialized, albeit temporarily. One of the established habits in our culture is to frame "pain" within a discourse and social practice of suffering which requires rightful compensation.

Equally strong is the urge to understand and empathize with pain. People go to great lengths in order to ease all pain. Great distress follows from not knowing or not being able to articulate the source of one's suffering, or from knowing it all too well, all the time. The yearning for solace, closure, and justice is understandable and worthy of respect.

This ethical dilemma was already posed by J. F. Lyotard and, much earlier, by Primo Levi about the survivors of Nazi concentration camps,²⁶ namely, that the kind of vulnerability we humans experience in the face of events on the scale of small or high horror is something for which no adequate compensation is even thinkable. It is just incommensurable: a hurt, or wound, beyond repair. This means that the notion of justice in the sense of a logic of rights and reparation is not applicable. For the post-structuralist Lyotard, ethics consists in accepting the impossibility of adequate compensation — and living with the open wound.

This is the road to an ethics of affirmation, which respects the pain but suspends the quest for both claims and compensation and resists the logic of retribution or rights. This is achieved through a sort of depersonalization of the event, which is the ultimate ethical challenge. The displacement of the "*zoē*"-indexed reaction reveals the fundamental meaningless-

ness of the hurt, the injustice, or injury one has suffered. "Why me?" is the refrain most commonly heard in situations of extreme distress. This expresses rage as well as anguish at one's ill fate. The answer is plain: actually, for no reason at all. Examples of this are the banality of evil in large-scale genocides like the Holocaust and the randomness of surviving them.²⁷ There is something intrinsically senseless about the pain, hurt, or injustice: lives are lost or saved for all and no reason at all. Why did some go to work in the World Trade Center on 9/11 while others missed the train? Why did Frida Kahlo take that tram which crashed so that she was impaled by a metal rod, and not the next one? For no reason at all. Reason has nothing to do with it. That's precisely the point. We need to delink pain from the quest for meaning and move beyond, to the next stage. That is the transformation of negative into positive passions.

This is not fatalism, and even less resignation, but rather a Nietzschean ethics of overturning the negative. Let us call it: *amor fati*: we have to be worthy of what happens to us and rework it within an ethics of relation. Of course repugnant and unbearable events do happen. Ethics consists, however, in reworking these events in the direction of positive relations. This is not carelessness or lack of compassion but rather a form of lucidity that acknowledges the meaninglessness of pain and the futility of compensation. It also reasserts that the ethical instance is not that of retaliation or compensation, but rather it rests on active transformation of the negative.

This requires a double shift. First, the affect itself moves from the frozen or reactive effect of pain to the proactive affirmation of its generative potential. Second, the line of questioning also shifts from the quest for the origin or source to a process of elaboration of the questions that express and enhance a subject's capacity to achieve freedom through the understanding of its limits. Biocentered egalitarianism breaks the expectation of mutual reciprocity that is central not only to liberal individualism but also to a poststructuralist ethics of otherness. Accepting the impossibility of mutual recognition and replacing it with one of mutual specification and mutual codependence is what is at stake in postsecular affirmative ethics. The ethical process of transforming negative into positive passions introduces time and motion into the frozen enclosure of seething pain. It is a postsecularist gesture of affirmation of hope, in the sense of creating the conditions for endurance and hence for a sustainable future.

What is an adequate ethical question? One that is capable of sustaining

the subject in his or her quest for more interrelations with others, that is, more "Life," motion, change, and transformation. The adequate ethical question provides the subject with a frame for interaction and change, growth and movement. It affirms life as difference-at-work. An ethical question has to be adequate in relation to how much a body can take. How much can an embodied entity take in the mode of interrelations and connections, that is, how much freedom of action can we endure? Affirmative ethics assumes, following Nietzsche, that humanity does not stem from freedom but rather freedom is extracted from the awareness of limitations. Postsecular ethics is about freedom from the burden of negativity, freedom through the understanding of our bondage.

The Case of Intergenerational Justice

The last aspect of the postsecular ethics of affirmation I want to spell out is the generational time-lines—in the sense of the construction of social horizons of hope, that is, sustainable futures.

Modernity, as an ideology of progress, postulated boundless faith in the future as the ultimate destination of the human. Zygmunt Bauman quotes one of my favorite writers, Diderot, who stated that modern man is in love with posterity. Postmodernity, on the other hand, is death-bound and sets as its horizon the globalization process in terms of technological and economic interdependence. Capitalism has no built-in teleological purpose, historical logic, or structure but rather is a self-imploding system that will not stop at anything in order to fulfil its aim: profit. This inherently self-destructive system feeds on and thus destroys the very conditions of its survival: it is omnivorous, and what it ultimately eats is the future itself.

Being nothing more than this all-consuming entropic energy, capitalism lacks the ability to create anything new: it can merely promote the recycling of spent hopes, repackaged in the rhetorical frame of the "next generation of gadgets." Affirmative ethics expresses the desire to endure in time and thus clashes with the deadly spin of the present.

The future today is no longer the self-projection of the modernist subject: Eve and the New Jerusalem. It is a basic and rather humble act of faith in the possibility of endurance, as duration or continuity, which honors our obligation to the generations to come. It involves the virtual unfold-

ing of the affirmative aspect of what we manage to actualize here and now. Virtual futures grow out of sustainable presents and vice-versa. This is how qualitative transformations can be actualized and transmitted along the genetic or time line. Transformative postsecular ethics takes on the future affirmatively, as the shared collective imagining that goes on becoming, to effect multiple modes of interaction with heterogeneous others. Futurity is made of this. Nonlinear evolution: an ethics that moves away from the paradigm of reciprocity and the logic of recognition and installs a rhizomic relation of mutual affirmation.

By targeting those who come after us as the rightful ethical interlocutors and assessors of our own actions, we are taking seriously the implications of our own situated position. This form of intergenerational justice is crucial. This point about intergenerational fairness need not, however, be expressed or conceptualized in the social imaginary as an Oedipal narrative. To be concerned about the future need not result in linearity, that is, in restating the unity of space and time as the horizon of subjectivity. On the contrary, nonlinear genealogical models of intergenerational decency are a way of displacing the Oedipal hierarchy.

These models of intergenerational decency involve a becoming-minoritarian of the elderly, the senior, and the parental figures, but also the de-Oedipalization of the bond of the young to those who preceded them. The process also calls for new ways of addressing and solving intergenerational conflicts — other than envy and rivalry — for joining forces across the generational divide by working together toward sustainable futures and practicing an ethics of nonreciprocity in the pursuit of affirmation.

An example: the older feminists may feel the cruel pinch of aging, but some of the young ones suffer from envy of the time period of the 1970s. The middle-aged survivors of the second wave may feel like war veterans or survivors but some of generation Y, as Iris van der Tuin taught me, call themselves “born-again baby boomers!”

So who’s envying whom?

We are in *this* together, indeed. Those who go through life under the sign of the desire for change need accelerations that jolt them out of set habits; political thinkers of the postsecular era need to be visionary, prophetic, and upbeat — insofar as they are passionately committed to writing the prehistory of the future, which is to say, to introducing change in the

present so as to affect multiple modes of belonging through complex and heterogeneous relations. This is the horizon of sustainable futures.

Hope is a sort of “dreaming forward,” it is an anticipatory virtue that permeates our lives and activates them. It is a powerful motivating force grounded in our collective imaginings indeed. These collective imaginings express very grounded concerns for the multitude of “anybodies” (*homo tantum*) that compose the human community lest our greed and selfishness destroy or diminish it for generations to come. Given that posterity per definition can never pay us back, this gesture is perfectly gratuitous.

Against the general lethargy, the rhetoric of selfish genes and possessive individualism on the one hand, and the dominant ideology of the melancholic lament on the other, hope rests with an affirmative ethics of sustainable futures, a deep and careless generosity, the ethics of nonprofit at an ontological level.

Why should one pursue this project?

For no reason at all. Reason has nothing to do with this. Let’s just do it for the hell of it and for love of the world.

Notes

- 1 Rose, “The Politics of Life Itself.”
- 2 Fraser, Kember, and Lury, eds., *Inventive Life*.
- 3 Franklin, Lury, and Stacey, *Global Nature, Global Culture*.
- 4 For “neovitalism,” see Fraser, Kember, and Lury, eds., *Inventive Life*, and for “vital politics,” see Rose, “The Politics of Life Itself.”
- 5 Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*.
- 6 Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*.
- 7 Springer, *Electronic Eros*.
- 8 Bukatman, *Terminal Identity*, 187.
- 9 Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, 1–2.
- 10 Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*.
- 11 Ansell-Pearson, *Viroid Life*.
- 12 Parisi, “For a Schizogenesis of Sexual Difference.”
- 13 Shiva, *Biopiracy*.
- 14 Rabinow, *Anthropos Today*; Esposito, *Bios*.
- 15 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
- 16 Haraway, *Modest_Witness@second_Millennium*; Gilroy, *Against Race*; Ben-

- habib, *The Claims of Culture*; Butler, *Precarious Life*; Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*; Grosz, *The Nick of Time*.
- 17 Shiva, *Biopiracy*.
- 18 Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*; Deleuze, *Logique du sens*; Deleuze, "Limmanence"; Guattari, *Chaosmosis*; Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*; Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*; Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*; Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.
- 19 Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*.
- 20 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*.
- 21 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
- 22 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*.
- 23 Deleuze and Guattari, "Capitalisme éurgumène"; Deleuze and Guattari, *Mille plateaux*.
- 24 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.
- 25 Gilroy, *Against Race*.
- 26 Lyotard, *Le Différend*.
- 27 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

ECONOMIES OF DISRUPTION

Rey Chow

The Elusive Material, What the Dog Doesn't Understand

Take your dog with you to the butcher and watch how much he understands of the goings on when you purchase your meat. It is a great deal and even includes a keen sense of property which will make him snap at a stranger's hand daring to come near the meat his master has obtained and which he will be allowed to carry home in his mouth. But when you have to tell him, "Wait, doggy, I haven't paid yet!" his understanding is at an end.

ALFRED SOHN-RETHEL

The Problematic of the Material

In a study of the centrality of commodity exchange in modern times, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, the German Marxist scholar Alfred Sohn-Rethel suggests the above experiment of taking a dog to the butcher as a way to discover the specifically human quality of the exchange practice.¹ Offering an erudite account of the historical knowledge about human labor (in what evolved to become political economy) and its gradual division from the sphere of "science," Sohn-Rethel's book is a perceptive response to Marx's famous statement: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."² As the narrative of "Wait, doggy, I haven't paid yet!" demonstrates, this "social being" may be best identified in what Sohn-Rethel calls the exchange abstrac-

tion, which originated in ancient times and reached its completion under capitalism. Sohn-Rethel goes on:

The pieces of metal or paper which he [the dog] watches you hand over, and which carry your scent, he knows, of course; he has seen them before. But their function as money lies outside the animal range. *It is not related to our natural or physical being, but comprehensible only in our interrelations as human beings.* It has reality in time and space, has the quality of a real occurrence taking place between me and the butcher and requiring a means of payment of material reality. *The meaning of this action registers exclusively in our human minds and yet has definite reality outside it — a social reality, though, sharply contrasting with the natural realities accessible to my dog.*³

As Sohn-Rethel argues throughout his book, this social being, unique to humans, exists as a kind of paradox: although it arises in the spatio-temporal sphere of human interrelations, its reality is typically outside the actors' conscious comprehension at the moment of the exchange. (In other words, human beings participate in this exchange spontaneously and unconsciously, without knowing or thinking much about it: as the French historian Paul Veyne puts it in another context, "The role of consciousness is not to make us notice the world but to allow us to move within it."⁴) In order to underscore this significance of the exchange abstraction as what happens *outside* the historicity of human consciousness, Sohn-Rethel goes so far as to state, "The exchange abstraction excludes everything that makes up history, human and even natural history. The entire empirical reality of facts, events and description by which one moment and locality of time and space is distinguishable from another is wiped out."⁵

By foregrounding the formal, or structural, specificity of commodity exchange in this dramatic manner, Sohn-Rethel is pointing to a problematic that reverberates as well throughout contemporary theoretical debates: what exactly do we mean when we invoke terms such as "materialism" and "materiality"?

On the one hand, of course, is the traditional philosophical understanding of materialism/materiality as matter and content, as it appears, for instance, even in the classic Marxist vocabulary of sensuousness (traceable to the essentialist humanism of Feuerbach), manual labor, and raw

materials. Materialism/materiality in this instance stands as the dialectic opposite of idealism, for which all things originate in the form of ideas, perhaps in the mind of some higher being. On the other hand, as Sohn-Rethel writes, Marx's painstaking analysis of commodity fetishism at the beginning of *Capital* has drawn attention to a process, a type of relation, that is not physically or sensorially perceptible and that nonetheless underlies and regulates interpersonal transactions of property ownership. This abstract or "mystical" process, in which, as Marx repeatedly reminds us, *things are other than what they seem*, constitutes nothing less than a radicalized epistemic frame and medium of signification in which the meanings of human activities unfold not only according to apparently rational, numerically calculable expenditures, profits, and balances but also according to an ongoing situation of inequity, a struggle between labor and capital. Understood in this sense, materialism/materiality is no longer simply inert matter, content, or essence but rather a long-standing series of interpersonal transactions of conflicting interests, bearing significances of cunning, manipulation, and exploitation that lie considerably beyond the dog's world. Needless to say, by amplifying the exchange abstraction and dramatizing it as definitively exclusive of "history," the "entire empirical reality of facts, events," and so forth, Sohn-Rethel has not exactly resolved the large, messy question of social inequity behind Marx's analysis. However, by underscoring the specifically human character of such exchange, he has helped crystallize and delimit the conceptual issues at stake.

Remembering another of Marx's famous remarks, in the eleventh and last of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, that "the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point however is to *change* it,"⁶ it would be logical to conclude that this problematic of materialism and materiality — reformulated by subsequent generations of scholars such as Sohn-Rethel as a second-order nature, unique to human undertakings and irreducible to nonhuman or animal nature — is implicitly linked to the ethical imperative of bringing about improved human (and perhaps nonhuman) conditions. In this linkage, the material is conceived of as, or analogized with, agency — more precisely, an agency of motion and transformation, an agency aimed at an increasingly *better* (that is, more advanced, more enlightened, and more democratic) world.⁷

In what follows, I would like to explore, in reference to a number of contemporary theorists, the extent to which this implied and often pre-

sumed mutual linkage among these key terms — materialism/materiality (understood as human activity), change (understood as progress), and agency — is ineluctable. As Paul Veyne puts it succinctly, “How can one do better than a philosophy of consciousness and still avoid falling into the aporias of Marxism?”⁸ In other words, what if we were to adopt Marxism’s focus on materialism/materiality (as a way to critique the philosophy of consciousness), yet without defining it (as Marxism tends to) as an agency of change-as-improvement? Or what if we argued that change-as-improvement is not necessarily the most crucial aspect of materialism/materiality? Would delinking these terms be at all conceivable — and what would be some of the consequences?

Poststructuralist Interventions

The long-standing popular tendency to equate materialism with matter — and thus with what is thought to be fundamental and concrete — has led, in the case of classic Marxist thinking, to the privileging of the so-called infrastructure or economic base, often at the expense of a proper investigation of the so-called superstructure. This was in part what led the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser to advance his rereading of ideology in terms of the critical role it plays in constituting the human subject. In his influential essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” written in the 1960s, Althusser goes against the custom in classic Marxism of associating ideology with “false consciousness” by arguing, instead, that ideology has a “material existence” in an apparatus and its practice or practices. Rather than a matter of false consciousness, he holds, ideology is the representation of an imaginary relationship between people and the social structure in which they live their lives on a daily basis. “What is represented in ideology,” Althusser writes, “is . . . not the system of real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of these individuals to the real relations in which they live.”⁹ By emphasizing the notion of the imaginary, what Althusser intended was not (simply) that ideology resides in people’s heads but, more important, that its functioning is inextricable from the intangible yet nondismissible, and therefore material, *psychosomatic mediation* involved in subject formation. Ideology works because, in the process of coming to terms with it, people become “interpellated” — are hailed,

constituted, and affirmed — as socially viable and coherent subjects, as who they (need to) think or believe they are. This process of interpellation, a process in which body and soul imbricate each other inseparably, lies at the heart of Althusser’s formulation of materialism/materiality-as-practice.

As is well known, Althusser’s recasting of ideology in these terms was indebted to Jacques Lacan’s poststructuralist psychoanalysis of the subject,¹⁰ but what is equally remarkable is that he also drew his rationale from Blaise Pascal’s provocative (and to some blasphemous) ruminations on traditional religious worship, thus enabling an articulation of materialism/materiality to action, practice, ritual, and apparatus:

[We] are indebted to Pascal’s defensive “dialectic” for the wonderful formula which will enable us to invert the order of the notional schema of ideology. Pascal says more or less: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe.” He thus scandalously inverts the order of things. . . .

. . . where only a single subject (such and such an individual) is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that *his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject.*¹¹

Through Pascal, Althusser inverts the conventionally assumed relationship between consciousness and actions. It is, he argues, actions (such as the human routines of worship) that produce consciousness (such as belief in God) rather than the other way around, and it is this inverted process that leads to the production — and successful interpellation — of the so-called human subject.

Whereas Althusser traces ideology’s function of interpellation back to the Christian church, the Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek identifies such a function in the operations of the secular, totalitarian state, as he demonstrates with characteristic good humor in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and numerous other works since the early 1990s. As Žižek understands it, totalitarianism is a superb instance of how ideology works in an atheist universe, with a logic that resembles Pascal’s and that may be paraphrased as follows: Even if I cannot prove that there is a God or Great Party Leader, my (material) acting *as if* there were one would give me great practical benefits. I pray, then I believe; I support the Great Party Leader,

then he exists. In other words, just as the prayers and practices of the churchgoers authenticate God, so also do the loyal and submissive acts of the people in a totalitarian regime substantiate the reality of the Great Party Leader. Žižek refers to this logic as the Pascalian-Marxian argument, "It is as if the totalitarian Leader is addressing his subjects and legitimizing his power precisely by referring to the . . . Pascalian-Marxian argument — that is, revealing to them the secret of the classical Master; basically, he is saying to them: 'I'm your Master because you treat me as your Master; it is you, with your activity, who make me your Master!'"¹²

The signature intervention made by poststructuralist theory in this instance is thus a transformation of the classic Marxist opposition between "head" and "hand" (or superstructure and base, or thoughts and actions) into what may be called the determinacy of the signifier — whether that signifier be in the form of language, practice, or ritual — in the fundamental constitution of subjectivity.¹³ Accordingly, any evaluation of the legacy of Marxism and its particular claim to materialism/materiality would need, in my view, to come to terms with this paradigm shift from the (time-honored and still prevalent) conflation of materialism with economism to a revamped materialism defined primarily as signification and subjectivity-in-process.¹⁴ A major outcome of this revamped materialism/materiality — or, more precisely, this alternative appropriation of, or claim to, the material — is the dethronement — and reconceptualization — of what used to be called consciousness. Rather than a unified "being" with a rational "mind" or "consciousness," the human subject is now drastically repositioned as the never-quite-complete product of an ongoing structuring process, a process that may be imperceptible and yet is materially evident and undeniable as effect. As a form of agency, therefore, the status of materialism/materiality has, with such poststructuralist interventions, moved from being a preexisting concrete ground (for example, "economic base") to being a destabilizable chain of signification, the certitude of which is at best provisional and subject to slippage.

The Question of Iteration

In so far as they unanimously displace the phenomenon of consciousness (what used to be considered as an inner or prior mental condition) onto material practices, the accounts by Sohn-Rethel, Althusser, and Žižek

share important epistemic insights. As Žižek remarks of Sohn-Rethel's argument: "The abstraction appertaining to the act of exchange is in an irreducible way external, decentered."¹⁵ Pretty much the same can be said of religious belief and panjandrum worship. However, a crucial dimension to these theorists' reconceptualization of consciousness remains to be explored in its full intricacy.

In these theorists' depictions of commodity exchange, religion, and totalitarianism, readers should have noticed that, although materialism/materiality is no longer understood as inert matter or content, it is not exactly equated with "mind" either. What these theorists call for is not a simple swapping of places between materialism and idealism. Instead, something else is revealed in the process, complicating the picture of this revamped materialism that is, in the final analysis, neither inert matter nor pure mentation. In his work, Žižek defines this something else by the term "sublime object." Using money as his primary example, he alludes to the sublime object in a manner that reminds us of Ferdinand de Saussure's description of language: "We have touched a problem unsolved by Marx, that of the *material* character of money: not of the empirical, material stuff money is made of, but of the *sublime* material, of that other 'indestructible and immutable' body which persists beyond the corruption of the body physical. . . . This immaterial corporeality of the 'body within the body' gives us a precise definition of the sublime object."¹⁶ Going a step further, we may ask: how does this sublimity, this "immaterial corporeality" that is at once absent and present, occur? How does it come into being in the first place?

Well, what do the exchanges of commodities, the prayers and rituals in church, and the submissive acts (including speech acts) toward the Great Party Leader have in common? However little noticed, is it not a certain *iterative behavior*? Are not the *mindless repetitions* — repetitions that escape, that do not require "consciousness," as it were — precisely what make the realities of interpersonal monetary transactions, God, and the Great Party Leader *materialize*, even as they then become misrecognized as the originating "causes"?

Although they are seldom discussed in conjunction with each other, Žižek's proposal of the sublime object of ideology calls to mind the French literary and cultural critic René Girard's well-known argument about the mimetic basis of human social interaction. For Girard, some readers may

recall, mimesis, the act of imitation, is not simply a (temporally subsequent) response to something that exists beforehand; it is, instead, the originating impulse, the primary event that engenders its own momentum and power of contagion. In close parallel to the aforementioned theorists' radicalization of consciousness, Girard reconceptualizes "desire" by showing how, rather than residing in a repressed manner inside individual human beings, desire may be seen as the outcome of social or group relations: we desire something, he suggests, not because that something is intrinsically desirable but because we notice that someone else desires it. Desire (like consciousness) is thus mimetic, to be located in the interstices of interactions between people. In the context of our present discussion, it might be appropriate to recast mimesis as a variety of iterative behavior and to see Girard's paradigm as another demonstration of how, to cite Žižek again, "the abstraction appertaining to the act of exchange is in an irreducible way external, decentered."

Precisely because it is blind—the classic case being a mob in which people echo, mimic, and repeat each other without thinking—mimetic behavior for Girard always contains the potential for violence and destruction, which must be forestalled by temporary remedies (such as sacrifice and scapegoating, which Girard identifies in myth, religion, art, and other age-old cultural practices).¹⁷ Although Sohn-Rethel, Althusser, and Žižek do not seem to view iterative behavior with the same pessimistic sense of a catastrophe in the making, their narratives—especially of the Christian church (Althusser) and the totalitarian state (Žižek)—amount to an unambiguous recognition of mimetic behavior's alarming manifestation as spontaneous (that is, "unthinking") surrender to authoritarianism, religious or secular. Even in the case of the commodified exchange abstraction, as Sohn-Rethel presents it, what is clearly foregrounded is a kind of automatized habit or reflex action—a "doing" that proceeds matter-of-factly without the actors' "knowing" or "reflecting." In short, notwithstanding the destabilizable nature of signification, these theorists' writings register in various forms of iterative behavior an unmistakable sense of the potential of terror.

Iteration as the Agency of Change toward a Better World?

In this light, an account that draws on iteration for a sense of hope, however qualified, such as the argument of gender as performance by the American theorist Judith Butler, is particularly thought provoking. In the essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" and other renowned works such as *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*,¹⁸ Butler advances the compelling point that all gendered identities may be considered as impersonation and approximation of an original that does not exist. Taking as her point of departure the conventional homophobic assumption that lesbianism (or gayness) is a derivative identity, secondary and inferior to the norm of heterosexuality, Butler argues that such derivativeness can—and should—instead be redeployed in the service of displacing hegemonic heterosexual norms. If lesbianism is dismissed as a mere imitation, a bad copy, she writes, "the political problem is not to establish the specificity of lesbian sexuality over and against its derivativeness, but to turn the homophobic construction of the bad copy against the framework that privileges heterosexuality as origin."¹⁹

If, for some of our other theorists, repetitive group behavior often constitutes the basis for ideological and political terror, for Butler, repetitive behavior rather constitutes the basis for psychic and social subversion. Taking her hint, among other things, from Jacques Derrida's inversion and displacement of mimesis in "The Double Session," Butler contends that "*imitation* does not copy that which is prior, but produces and *inverts* the very terms of priority and derivativeness."²⁰ Her logic may be glimpsed in the following, nuanced fleshing-out of her general argument about identity politics:

It is through the repeated play of this sexuality that the "I" is insistently reconstituted as a lesbian "I"; paradoxically, it is precisely the *repetition* of that play that establishes as well the *instability* of the very category that it constitutes. For if the "I" is a site of repetition, that is, if the "I" only achieves the semblance of identity through a certain repetition of itself, then the I is always displaced by the very repetition that sustains it. In other words, does or can the "I" ever repeat itself, cite itself, faithfully, or is there always a displacement from its former moment

that establishes the permanently non-self-identical status of that “I” or its “being lesbian”? *What “performs” does not exhaust the “I”; it does not lay out in visible terms the comprehensive content of that “I,” for if the performance is “repeated,” there is always the question of what differentiates from each other the moments of identity that are repeated.*²¹

Or, as she similarly formulates it in another context:

I would suggest that performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that “performance” is not a singular “act” or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, *but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance.*²²

Whereas the very contingency of iteration—its inherent instability—represents for Althusser, Žižek, and Girard a potential for instrumentalization by institutions of power such as the church or the state, institutions which typically capitalize on such contingency for purposes of domination and indoctrination, for Butler, precisely the same contingency lends itself to the chance of differentiation—“What ‘performs’ does not exhaust the ‘I’” or “[determine] it fully in advance”—and thus to the possibility of subversion. In this way, even the oppressive conformity inscribed in the speeches, actions, and rituals of, say, compulsory heterosexual normativity becomes, paradoxically, a kind of still-malleable material, a porous “ground” on which alternative performances (of seemingly fixed identities) may be reiterated, played out, and reinvented. As Butler writes: “if there is *agency*, it is to be found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law, by the materialization of that law, the compulsory appropriation and identification with those normative demands.”²³

Interestingly, then, although she begins with a comparable poststructuralist reconceptualization of consciousness, whereby the primacy of consciousness is overthrown and displaced onto repeated material pro-

cesses (including speech acts and embodied performances), Butler seems to arrive at a very different kind of conclusion as to the potentiality of the fundamentally changed relationship between—to recall Marx’s words—“consciousness” and “social being.” Where the other theorists emphasize or imply probable scenarios of horror, disaster, and sacrifice (scenarios that may be ideologically inscribed without the use of physical violence, politically instituted with physical violence, or both), Butler, in a utopian gesture that categorically refutes the likelihood of complete self-identity (that is, closure) in any type of signification, holds onto a hope for freedom,²⁴ for a *possible* disruption of that “process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.”²⁵

In this confrontation between terror and freedom, has materialism/materiality arrived at a crossroads, or an inevitable impasse, marked as it seems to be by ultimately incommensurable analytic intentions, leanings, and passions? Might such a confrontation signal that the time is ripe for a realignment of the conceptual stakes involved—as is suggested, for instance, by the questions I pose near the beginning?

That is to say, if, after poststructuralism, attempts to lay claim to materialism/materiality are irrevocably traversed by an insistence on the determinacy of the signifier (understood broadly as language, action, practice, ritual, or gendered orientation and behavior) and if, by the same theoretical orientation, the signifier is recognized as what works by iteration, would iteration henceforth have to become the only viable way to imagine agency? (Can there be other ways?) And yet, all too clearly, as much as a potentiality for radical social transformation (“progress”; “freedom”), such agency also embeds in it the potentiality for sustaining and reinforcing relations of subordination, subjugation, and social unevenness. How, then, should we rethink the hitherto presumed mutual—and arguably circular—linkages among materialism, agency, and change-as-improvement? What forms of disarticulation and rearticulation would be possible—indeed, would be necessary?

Whatever it is about the material that the dog doesn’t understand, we too are far from puzzling out . . .

Notes

- 1 Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 45.
- 2 Marx, preface (1859) to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 356.
- 3 Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 45; my emphases.
- 4 Veyne, "Foucault Revolutionizes History," 157.
- 5 Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 48–49.
- 6 Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, 3.
- 7 Civilization, as it is understood by Western historians such as Hegel, a major influence on Marx, has always stood for *progress* in time. For an interesting critique of this predominant notion of history, see Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History*, in particular chap. 2, "Historicality and the Prose of the World."
- 8 Veyne, "Foucault Revolutionizes History," 179.
- 9 Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 125–26, 155.
- 10 For an informative discussion, see Coward and Ellis, *Language and Materialism*, in particular chaps. 5 and 6.
- 11 Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 168–69; emphasis his.
- 12 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 146.
- 13 I have discussed other figures associated with poststructuralism elsewhere and will not repeat myself here. See, for instance, "Poststructuralism" and *The Age of the World Target*, introduction and chap. 2.
- 14 See the helpful discussions in Coward and Ellis, *Language and Materialism*.
- 15 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 19.
- 16 Ibid., 18; emphases his. Interestingly, when he made his point about language, Saussure also used money as an analogy: "It is impossible for sound alone, a material element, to belong to language. . . . All our conventional values have the characteristic of not being confused with the tangible element which supports them. For instance, it is not the metal in a piece of money that fixes its value. A coin nominally worth five francs may contain less than half its worth of silver. Its value will vary according to the amount stamped upon it and according to its use inside or outside a political boundary. This is even more true of the linguistic signifier, which is not phonic but incorporeal—constituted not by its material substance but by the differences that separate its sound-image from all others." Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 118–19.
- 17 For a more detailed discussion of the implications of Girard's work, see my "Sacrifice, Mimesis, and the Theorizing of Victimhood."
- 18 See Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination"; *Gender Trouble*, in particular chap. 3; *Bodies That Matter*, in particular the introduction and part 1.
- 19 Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 304.
- 20 Ibid., 307; emphases hers. See also Derrida, "The Double Session," 173–286.
- 21 Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 304; first two emphases hers, last emphasis mine.
- 22 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 95; first emphasis hers, second emphasis mine.
- 23 Ibid., 12; emphasis hers.
- 24 This sense of freedom is, admittedly, qualified because agency can only be inscribed in reiterative practice: "The paradox of subjectivation (*assujétissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power." Ibid., 15.
- 25 This is the definition of matter that Butler proposes for thinking about gendered subjectivity in place of "conceptions of construction"; see *ibid.*, 9.

Sara Ahmed

Orientations Matter

This essay attempts to show why and how orientations matter. To say orientations matter affects how we think “matter.” Orientations might shape how matter “matters.” If matter is affected by orientations, by the ways in which bodies are directed toward things, it follows that matter is dynamic, unstable, and contingent. What matters is itself an effect of proximities: we are touched by what comes near, just as what comes near is affected by directions we have already taken. Orientations are how the world acquires a certain shape through contact between bodies that are not in a relation of exteriority. In thinking the dynamism of matter, this essay joins a body of scholarship that has been called by the editors of this volume a “critical materialism.” I would nonetheless resist calling my own contribution a “new” materialism inasmuch as my own work draws on, and is indebted to, earlier feminist engagements with phenomenology that were undertaken during the period of “the cultural turn.” These phenomenological engagements belie the claim made by some recent materialist critics to the effect that, during this period, matter was the only thing that did not matter.¹

Orientations matter. Let’s say I am oriented toward writing. This means writing would be something that mattered, as well as something I do. To sustain such an orientation would mean certain objects must be avail-

able to me (tables, computers, pens, paper). Orientations shape how the world coheres around me. Orientations affect what is near or proximate to the body, those objects that we do things with.

Orientations thus “matter” in both senses of the word “matter.” First, orientations matter in the simple sense that orientations are significant and important. To be oriented in a certain way is how certain things come to be significant, come to be objects *for me*. Such orientations are not only personal. Spaces too are oriented in the sense that certain bodies are “in place” in this or that place. The study might be oriented around the writer, who is then “in place” in the study. To say spaces are oriented around certain bodies is to show how some bodies will be more “in place” than others.

Orientations also matter in the second sense of being about physical or corporeal substance. Orientations shape the corporeal substance of bodies and whatever occupies space. Orientations affect how subjects and objects materialize or come to take shape in the way that they do. The writer writes, and the labor of writing shapes the surface of the writer’s body. The objects used for writing are shaped by the intention to write; they are assembled around the support they give. Orientations are about how matter surfaces by being directed in one way or another.

In this essay, I take “the table” as my primary object for thinking about how orientations matter. Why tables? Tables matter, you could say, as objects we do things on. We could describe the table as an “on” device; the table provides a surface on which we place things as well as do things. If we do things on tables, then tables are effects of what we do. To explore how tables function as orientation devices, I will bring together Marxism and phenomenology. My aim is to consider how the materialization of bodies involves forms of labor that disappear in the familiarity or “givenness” of objects such as tables. My analysis of how orientations matter will thus combine historical materialism with a materialism of the body.

Starting Points

If we start with the point of orientations, we find that orientations are about starting points. As Husserl describes in the second volume of *Ideas*: “If we consider the characteristic way in which the Body presents itself and do the same for things, then we find the following situation: each Ego has

its own domain of perceptual things and necessarily perceives the things in a certain orientation. The things that appear do so from this or that side, and in this mode of appearing is included irrevocably a relation to a here and its basic directions.²² Orientations are about how we begin, how we proceed from “here.” Husserl relates the questions of “this or that side” to the point of “here,” which he also describes as the zero-point of orientation, the point from which the world unfolds and which makes what is “there” over “there.” It is also given that we are “here” only at this point, that near and far are lived as relative markers of distance. Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann also describe orientation as a question of one’s starting point: “The place in which I find myself, my actual ‘here,’ is the starting point for my orientation in space.”²³ The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the “here” of the body and the “where” of its dwelling.

At what point does the world unfold? Or at what point does Husserl’s world unfold? Let’s start where he starts, in his first volume of *Ideas*, which is with the world as it is given “from the natural standpoint.” Such a world is the world that we are “in” as the world that takes place around me: “I am aware of a world, spread out in space endlessly.”²⁴ This world is not simply spread out; it has already taken certain shapes, which are the very form of what is “more and less” familiar:

For me real objects are there, definite, more or less familiar, agreeing with what is actually perceived without being themselves perceived or even intuitively present. I can let my attention wander from the writing-table I have just seen or observed, through the unseen portions of the room behind my back to the veranda into the garden, to the children in the summer house, and so forth, to all the objects concerning which I precisely “know” that they are there and yonder in my immediate co-perceived surroundings.⁵

The familiar world begins with the writing table, which is in the room: we can name this room as Husserl’s study, as the room in which he writes. *It is from here that the world unfolds.* He begins with the writing table, and then turns to other parts of the room, those which are, as it were, behind him. We are reminded that what we can see in the first place depends on which way we are facing. Having begun here, with what is in front of his front and behind his back, Husserl then turns to other spaces, which he de-

scribes as rooms, and which he knows are there insofar as they are already given to him as places by memory. These other rooms are coperceived: they are not singled out; and they do not have his attention.

By noticing the objects that appear in Husserl’s writing, we get a sense of how being directed toward some objects and not others involves a more general orientation toward the world. The philosopher is oriented toward the writing table, as the object on which writing happens, which means keeping other things and rooms relegated to the background. After all, it is not surprising that philosophy is full of tables. As Ann Banfield observes in her wonderful book *The Phantom Table*: “Tables and chairs, things nearest to hand for the sedentary philosopher, who comes to occupy chairs of philosophy, are the furniture of that ‘room of one’s own’ from which the real world is observed.”²⁶ Tables are “near to hand” along with chairs as the furniture that secures the very “place” of philosophy. The use of tables shows us the very orientation of philosophy in part by showing us what is proximate to the body of the philosopher or what the philosopher comes into contact with.

Even if Husserl’s writing table first appears as being in front of him, it does not necessarily keep its place. For Husserl suggests that phenomenology must “bracket” or put aside what is given, what is made available by ordinary perception. If phenomenology is to see the table, he suggests, it must see “without” the natural attitude, which keeps us within the familiar, and indeed, within the space already “decided” as “being” the family home. Phenomenology, in Husserl’s formulation, can come into being as a first philosophy only if it suspends all that gathers together as a natural attitude, not through Cartesian doubt but through a way of perceiving the world “as if” one did not assume its existence as taking some forms rather than others.⁷

So Husserl begins again by taking the table as an object that matters in a different way. How does the object appear when it is no longer familiar? As he describes: “We start by taking an example. Keeping this table steadily in view as I go round it, changing my position in space all the time, I have continually the consciousness of the bodily presence out there of this one and the self-same table, which in itself remains unchanged throughout” (vol. 1, 130). We can see here how Husserl turns to “the table” as an object by looking at it rather than over it. The bracketing means “this table” becomes “the table.” By beginning with the table, on its own, as it

were, the object appears self-same. It is not that the object's self-sameness is available at first sight. Husserl moves around the table, changing his position. For such movement to be possible, consciousness must flow: we must not be interrupted by other matters. As Husserl elaborates:

I close my eyes. The other senses are inactive in relation to the table. I have now no perception of it. I open my eyes and the perception returns. The perception? Let us be more accurate. Under no circumstances does it return to me individually the same. *Only the table is the same*, known as identical through the synthetic consciousness, which connects the new experience with the recollection. The perceived thing can be, without being perceived, without my being aware of it even as a potential only (in the way, actuality, as previously described) and perhaps even without itself changing at all. But the perception itself is what it is within the steady flow of consciousness, and is itself constantly in flux; the perceptual now is ever passing over into the adjacent consciousness of the just-past, a new now simultaneously gleams forth, and so on. (vol. 1, 130, emphasis added)

This argument suggests the table as object is given, as "the same," as a givenness which "holds" or is shaped by the "flow" of perception. This is precisely Husserl's point: the object is intended through perception. As Robert Sokolowski puts it, "When we perceive an object, we do not just have a flow of profiles, a series of impressions; in and through them all, we have one and the same object given to us, and the identity of the object is intended and given."⁸ Each new impression is connected with what has gone before, in the very form of an active "re-collection." Significantly, the object becomes an object of perception only given this work of recollection, such that the "new" exists in relation to what is already gathered by consciousness: each impression is linked to the other, so that the object becomes more than the profile that is available in any moment.

Given this, the sameness of the object involves the specter of absence and nonpresence. I do not see it as itself. I cannot view the table from all points of view at once. Given that the table's sameness can only be intended, Husserl makes what is an extraordinary claim: *Only the table remains the same*. The table is the only thing that keeps its place in the flow of perception. The sameness of the table is hence spectral. If the table is the same, it is only because we have conjured its missing sides. Or, we

can even say that we have conjured its behind. I want to relate what is "missed" when we "miss" the table to the spectrality of history, what we miss may be behind the table in another sense: what is behind the table is what must have already taken place for the table to arrive.

Backgrounds and Arrivals

As we have seen, phenomenology, for Husserl, means apprehending the object as if it was unfamiliar, so that we can attend to the flow of perception itself. What this flow of perception tells is the partiality of absence as well as presence: what we do not see (say, the back or side of the object) is hidden from view and can only be intended. We single out this object only by pushing other objects to the edges or "fringes" of vision.

Husserl suggests that inhabiting the familiar makes "things" into backgrounds for action: they are there, but they are there in such a way that I don't see them. The background is a "*dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality*."⁹ So although Husserl faces his writing table, it does not mean the table is singled out as an object. Even though the table is before him, it might also be in the background. My argument in the previous section needs some qualification: even when Husserl faces the writing table, it does not necessarily follow that the table is "in front" of him. What we face can also be part of the background, suggesting that the background may include more and less proximate objects. It is not accidental that when Husserl brings "the table" to the front, the writing table disappears. Being orientated toward the writing table might even provide the condition of possibility for its disappearance.

Husserl's approach to the background as what is "unseen" in its "there-ness" or "familiarity" allows us to consider how the familiar takes shape by being unnoticed. I want to extend his model by thinking about the "background" of the writing table in another sense. Husserl considers how this table might be *in* the background as well as the background that is *around* the table, when "it" comes into view. I want us to consider how the table itself may *have* a background. The background would be understood as that which must take place in order for something to arrive. We can recall the different meanings of the word "background." A background can refer to the ground or parts situated in the rear, or to the portions of the picture represented at a distance, which in turn allows what is "in" the foreground

to acquire the shape that it does. Both of these meanings point to the spatiality of the background. We can also think of the background as having a temporal dimension.¹⁰ When we tell a story about someone, for instance, we might give their background: this meaning of “background” would be about “what is behind,” where “what is behind” refers to what is in the past or what happened before. We might also speak of “family background,” which would refer not just to the past of an individual but to other kinds of histories which shape an individual’s arrival into the world and through which the family itself becomes a social given.

At least two entities have to arrive for there to be an encounter, a “bringing forth” in the sense of an occupation. So, this table and Husserl have to “co-incide” for him to write his philosophy about “the table.” We must remember not to forget the dash in “co-incident,” as such a forgetting would turn shared arrival into a matter of chance. To “co-incide” suggests how different things happen at the same moment, a happening which brings things near to other things, whereby the nearness shapes the shape of each thing. If being near to this or that object is not a matter of chance, what happens in the “now” of this nearness remains open, in the sense that we do not always know how things will affect each other, or how we will be affected by things.¹¹

So, if phenomenology is to attend to the background, it might do so by giving an account of the conditions of emergence for something, which would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness. If we do not see (but intend) the behind of the object, we might also not see (but intend) its background in this temporal sense. We need to face the background of an object, redefined as the conditions for the emergence of not only the object (we might ask: how did it arrive?) but also the act of perceiving the object, which depends on the arrival of the body that perceives. The background to perception might involve such intertwining histories of arrival, which would explain how Husserl got near enough to his table, as the object that secures the very place of philosophy.

Marxism allows us to rethink the object as not only in history but as an effect of historical processes. The Marxian critique of German Idealism begins after all with a critique of the idea that the object is “in the present” or that the object is “before me.” As Marx and Engels describe, in their critique of Feuerbach:

He does not see how the sensuous world around him is, not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry, and of the state of society; and indeed, in the sense that it is a historical product, and the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations, each standing on the shoulders of the preceding one, developing its industry and its intercourse, modifying its social system, according to its changed needs. Even the objects of the simplest “sensuous certainty” are only given to him through social demands, industry and commercial intercourse. The cherry-tree, like almost all fruit trees, was, as is well known, only in a few centuries, transplanted by commerce into our zone, and therefore only by the action of a definite society in a definite age has it become “sensuous certainty” for Feuerbach.¹²

If we were simply to “look at” the object we face, then we would be erasing the “signs” of history. We would apprehend the object as simply there, as given in its sensuous certainty, rather than as “having got here,” an arrival which is how objects are binding and how they assume a social form. So objects (such as the cherry tree) are “transplanted.” They take shape through social action, through “the activity of a whole succession of generations,” which is forgotten when the object is apprehended as simply given.

What passes through history is not only the work done by generations but the “sedimentation” of that work as the condition of arrival for future generations. History cannot simply be perceived on the surface of the object, even if how objects surface or take shape is an effect of such histories. In other words, history cannot simply be turned into something that is given in its sensuous certainty, as if it were a property of an object.

If idealism takes the object as given, then it fails to account for its conditions of arrival, which are not simply given. Idealism is the philosophical counterpart to what Marx would later describe as commodity fetishism. In *Capital*, he suggests that commodities are made up of two elements, “matter and labour.”¹³ Labor is understood as “changing the form of matter” (50). The commodity is assumed to have value or a life of its own only if we forget this labor: “It becomes value only in its congealed state, when embodied in the form of some object” (57).

Marx uses the example of “the table” to suggest that the table is made

from wood (which provides, as it were, the matter) and that the work of the table, the work that it takes to “make the table,” changes the form of the wood, even though the table “is” still made out of wood. As he describes: “It is as clear as noon-day that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the material furnished by nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered by making a table out of it, for all that, the table continues to be that common every-day thing, wood. But, as soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent” (76). Noticeably, the Marxian critique of commodity fetishism relies here on a distinction between matter and form, between the wood and the table. The becoming-table of the wood is not the same as its commodification. The table has use-value, even after it has transformed the “form” of the wood. The table can be used, and in being used, the value of the table is not exchanged and made abstract. The table has use-value until it is exchanged. One problem with this model is that the dynamism of “making form” is located in the transformation of nature into use-value: we could also suggest that the “wood” (nature/matter) has acquired its form over time. Nature then would not be simply “there” waiting to be formed or to take form. Marx’s and Engel’s earlier critique of idealism involves a more dynamic view of the “facts of matter”: even the trees, which provide the wood, are themselves “brought forth” as effects of generational action. The wood is itself “formed matter” insofar as trees are not simply given, but take shape as an effect of labor (transplantation).¹⁴ The table is given only through these multiple histories of labor, redefined as matter taking form.¹⁵

It is not surprising that Jacques Derrida offers a critique of the Marxian distinction between use-value and exchange-value by turning toward the table. He suggests: “The table is familiar, too familiar.”¹⁶ For Derrida, the table is not simply something we use: “The table has been worn down, exploited, overexploited, or else set aside and beside itself, no longer in use, in antique shops or auction rooms” (149). He hence suggests that “the table in use” is as metaphysical as “table as commodity”: use-value as well as exchange-value involves fetishism (162). While I agree with this argument, we might note that for Marx the table in use is not simply inert or simply matter: it involves the “trans-formation” of matter into form. Use-value is hence not a simple matter for Marx even if he locates the transcendental in the commodity.

What a Marxist approach could allow us to do if we extend his critique of the commodity to the very matter of wood, as well as to the form of the table, is to consider the history of “what appears” as a dynamic history of things being moved around. The table certainly moves around. I buy the table (for this or that amount of money) as a table intended for writing. I have to bring it to the space where it will reside (the study or the space marked out in the corner of a room). Well, others bring it for me. I wince as the edge of the table hits the wall, leaving a mark on the wall, as well as a mark on the table, which shows what it came into contact with in the time of its arrival. The table, having arrived, is nestled in the corner of the room. I use it as a writing desk. And yet, I am not sure what will happen in the future. I could put this table to a different use (I could use it as a dining table if it is big enough “to support” this kind of action) or could even forget about the table if I ceased to write. Then, the table might be put aside or put to one side. The object is not reducible to the commodity, even when it is bought and sold. The object is not reducible to itself, which means it does not “have” an “itself” that is apart from its contact with others.

This table was made by somebody, and there is a history to its arrival, a history of transportation, which could be redescribed as a history of *changing hands*. As Igor Kopytoff puts it, we can have a cultural biography of things “as they move through different hands, contexts and uses.”¹⁷ This table, you might say, has a story. What a story it could tell. What we need to recall is how the “thisness” of this table does not, as it were, belong to it: what is particular about this table, what we can tell through its biography, is also what allows us to tell a larger story: a story not only of “things” changing hands but of how things come to matter by taking shape through and in the labor of others.

Such histories are not simply available *on* the surface of the object, apart from the scratches that might be left behind, which could also be thought of as what’s left of the behind. Histories are hence spectral, just like Husserl’s “missing sides.” We do not know, of course, the story of Husserl’s table, how it arrived or what happened to the table after Husserl stopped writing. But having arrived, we can follow what the table allowed him to do by reading his philosophy as a philosophy that turns to the table. So even if the “thisness” of the table disappears in his work, we could allow its “thisness” to reappear by making this table matter in our reading.

Bodies Doing Things

The object has arrived. And, having arrived, what then does it do? I want to suggest that objects not only are shaped by work, but they also take the shape of the work they do. We can consider how objects are occupied, how we are busy with them. An occupation is what makes an object busy.

Heidegger poses this question of occupation by turning to the table. In *Ontology — The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, Heidegger contrasts two ways of describing tables.¹⁸ In the first model, the table is encountered as “a thing in space — as a spatial thing.”¹⁹ As Heidegger describes it: “Aspects show themselves and open up in ever new ways as we walk around the thing” (68). He suggests that the description of the table as a spatial thing is inaccurate not because it is false (the table might after all appear in this way) but because it fails to describe how the significance of the thing is not simply “in” it, but is rather a “characteristic of being” (67–68). For Heidegger what makes “the table” what it is and not something else is what the table allows us to do.

What follows is a rich phenomenological description of the table as it is experienced from the points of view of those who share the space of its dwelling:

What is there in *the* room there at home is *the* table (not “a” table among many other tables in other rooms and houses) at which one sits *in order to* write, have a meal, sew, or play. Everyone sees this right away, e.g. during a visit: it is a writing table, a dining table, a sewing table — such is the primary way in which it is being encountered in itself. This characteristic of “in order to do something” is not merely imposed on the table by relating and assimilating it to something else which it is not. (69)

In other words, what we do with the table or what the table allows us to do is essential to the table. The table provides a surface around which the family gathers. Heidegger describes his wife sitting at the table and reading and “the boys” busying themselves at the table. The table is assembled around the support it gives. The “in order to” structure of the table, in other words, means that those who are “at” the table are also part of what makes the table itself. Doing things “at” the table is what makes the table

what it is and not some other thing. So while bodies do things, things might also “do bodies.”

How do bodies “matter” in what objects do? Let’s consider Husserl’s table. It does not seem that Husserl is touched by his table. When Husserl “grasps” his table from the series of impressions as being more than what he sees at any point in time, it is his “eyes” that are doing the work. He “closes his eyes” and “opens his eyes.”²⁰ The object’s partiality is seen, even if the object is unavailable in a single sight.

In the second volume of *Ideas*, Husserl attends to the lived body (*Leib*) and to the intimacy of touch. The table returns, as one would expect. And yet, what a different table we find if we reach for it differently. Here, it is the hands rather than the eyes that reach the table: “My hand is lying on the table. I experience the table as something solid, cold, smooth” (vol. 2, 153). Husserl conveys the proximity between bodies and objects as things that matter insofar as they make and leave an impression. Bodies are “something touching which is touched” (vol. 2, 155). We touch things and are touched by things. In approaching the table, we are approached by the table. As Husserl shows, the table might be cold and smooth, but the quality of its surface can be felt only when I cease to stand apart from it. Bodies as well as objects take shape through being orientated toward each other, an orientation that may be experienced as the cohabitation or sharing of space.

We might think that we reach for all that simply comes into view. And yet, what “comes into” view or what is within our horizon is not simply a matter of what we find here or there, or even where we find ourselves, as we move here or there. What is reachable is determined precisely by orientations we have already taken. Some objects do not even become objects of perception since the body does not move toward them: they are “beyond the horizon” of the body, out of reach. Orientations are about the direction we take that puts some things and not others in our reach. So the object, which is apprehended only by exceeding my gaze, can be apprehended only insofar as it has come to be available to me: its reachability is not simply a matter of its place or location (the white paper on the table, for instance) but is shaped by the orientations I have taken that mean I face some ways more than others (toward this kind of table, which marks out the space I tend to inhabit).

Phenomenology helps us to explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures. Both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, after all, describe bodily horizons as “sedimented histories.”²¹ This model of history as bodily sedimentation has been taken up by social theorists as well as philosophers. For Pierre Bourdieu, such histories are described as the habitus, “systems of durable, transposable, dispositions” which integrate past experiences through the very “*matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions*” that are necessary to accomplish “infinitely diversified tasks.”²² For Judith Butler, it is precisely how phenomenology exposes the “sedimentation” of history in the repetition of bodily action that makes it a useful resource for feminism.²³

We could say that history “happens” in the very repetition of gestures, which is what gives bodies their dispositions or tendencies. We might note here that the labor of such repetition disappears through labor: if we work hard at something, then it seems “effortless.” This paradox — with effort it becomes effortless — is precisely what makes history disappear in the moment of its enactment. The repetition of work is what makes the signs of work disappear. It is important that we think not only about *what* is repeated but also about how the repetition of actions takes us in certain directions: we are also orientating ourselves toward some objects more than others, including not only physical objects (the different kinds of tables) but also objects of thought, feeling, and judgment, or objects in the sense of aims, aspirations, and objectives. I might orient myself around writing, for instance, not simply as a certain kind of work (although it is that, and it requires certain objects for it to be possible) but also as a goal: writing becomes something that I aspire to, even as an identity (becoming a writer). So the object we aim for, *which we have in our view*, also comes into our view through being held in place as that which we seek to be: the action searches for identity as the mark of attainment (the writer “becomes” a writer through writing).

I too am working on a table, though for me, the kitchen table as much as the writing table provides the setting for action: for cooking, eating, as well as writing. I have a study space, and I work on a table in that space. I type this now, using a keyboard placed on a computer table, which resides in the study, as a space that has been set aside for this kind of work. As I type, I face the table, and it is what I am working on. I am touching the object as well as the keyboard and am aware of it as a sensuous given that is

available for me. In repeating the work of typing, my body comes to feel a certain way. My neck gets sore, and I stretch to ease the discomfort. I pull my shoulders back every now and then as the posture I assume (a bad posture I am sure) is a huddle: I huddle over the table as I repeat the action (the banging of keys with the tips of my fingers); the action shapes me, and it leaves its impression through bodily sensations, prickly feelings on the skin surface, and the more intense experience of discomfort. I write, and, in performing this work, I might yet become my object and become a writer, with a writer’s body and a writer’s tendencies (the sore neck and shoulders are sure signs of having done this kind of work).

Repetitive strain injury (RSI) can be understood as the effect of such repetition: we repeat some actions, sometimes over and over again, and this is partly about the nature of the work we might do. Our body takes the shape of this repetition; *we get stuck in certain alignments as an effect of this work*. For instance, my right ring finger has acquired the shape of its own work: the constant use of a pen, in writing, has created a lump, which is the shape that is shaped by the work of this repetition; my finger almost looks “as if” it has the shape of a pen as an impression upon it. The object leaves its impression: the action, as an intending as well as a tending toward the object, shapes my body in this way and that. The work of repetition is not neutral work; *it orients the body in some ways rather than others*. The lump on my finger is a sure sign of an orientation I have taken not just toward the pen-object or the keyboard but also to the world, as someone who does a certain kind of work for a living.

Bodies hence acquire orientation through the repetitions of some actions over others, as actions that have certain “objects” in view, whether they are physical objects required to do the work (the writing table, the pen, the keyboard) or the ideal objects that one identifies with. The nearness of such objects, their availability within my bodily horizon, is not casual: *it is not just that I find them there, like that*. Bodies tend toward some objects more than others given their tendencies. These tendencies are not ordinary but are effects of the repetition of the “tending toward.”

Over time, we acquire our tendencies, as the acquisition of what is given. Bodies could be described as “becoming given.” Orientations thus take time. If orientations are an effect of what we tend toward, then they point to the future, to what is not yet present. And yet, orientations are shaped by what is behind us, creating a loop between what is toward and

behind. In other words, we are directed by our background. Your point of arrival is your family background, and the family itself provides a background in which things happen and happen in a certain way. Doing things, as we have seen, is what gives objects a certain place. It is no accident that "the table" is an object around which the family gathers, doing the work of the family or even bringing the family into existence as an object that can be shared. In being given a place at the table, the family takes its place.

The table can thus be described as a kinship object.²⁴ The shared orientation toward the table allows the family to cohere as a group, even when we do different things "at" the table. So if our arrival is already an inheritance (which is what we mean when we speak so easily of the family background, which is what puts the family into the background), then we inherit the proximity of certain objects, as those things that are given to us within the family home. These objects are not only material: they may be values, capital, aspirations, projects, and styles. We inherit proximities. We inherit the nearness of some objects more than others; the background is what keeps certain things within reach. So the child tends toward that which is near enough, whereby nearness or proximity is what already "resides" at home. Having tended toward what is within reach, the child acquires its tendencies.

The background then *is not simply behind the child*: it is what the child is asked to aspire *toward*. The background, given in this way, can orient us toward the future: it is where the child is asked to direct his or her desire by accepting the family line as his or her own inheritance. There is pressure to inherit this line, a pressure that can speak the language of love, happiness, and care. We do not know what we could become without these points of pressure which insist that happiness will follow if we do this or we do that. And yet, these places where we are under pressure do not always mean we stay on line; at certain points, we can refuse the inheritance, points that are often lived as "breaking points." We do not always know what breaks at these points.

Feminist Tables

I have suggested that bodies materialize; they acquire certain tendencies through proximity to objects whose nearness we have already inherited (the family background). The materialization of subjects is hence insepa-

rable from objects, which circulate as things to do things with. Let's return to Husserl's writing table. Recall that Husserl attends to the writing table, which becomes "the table" by keeping the domestic world behind him. This domestic world, which surrounds the philosopher, must be "put aside" or even "put to one side" in his turn toward objects *as* objects of perception. This disappearance of familiar objects might make more than the object disappear. The writer who does the work of philosophy might disappear if we were to erase the signs of "where" it is that he works. Feminist philosophers have shown us how the masculinity of philosophy is evidenced in the disappearance of the subject under the sign of the universal.²⁵ The masculinity might also be evident in the disappearance of the materiality of objects, in the bracketing of the materials out of which, as well as upon which, philosophy writes itself, as a way of apprehending the world.

We could call this the fantasy of a "paperless" philosophy, a philosophy that is not dependent on the materials upon which it is written. As Audre Lorde reflects, "A room of one's own may be necessary for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter and plenty of time."²⁶ The fantasy of a paperless philosophy involves the disappearance of political economy, the "materials" of philosophy, as well as its dependence on forms of labor, both domestic and otherwise. In other words, the labor of writing might disappear along with the paper.

Being oriented toward the writing table not only relegates other rooms in the house to the background but might also depend *on the work done to keep the desk clear*. The desk that is clear is one that is ready for writing. One might even consider the domestic work that must have taken place for the philosopher to turn to the writing table, to be writing on the table, and to keep that table as the object of his attention. We can recall here the long history of feminist scholarship and activism on the politics of housework: about the ways in which women, as wives and servants, do the work required to keep such spaces available for men and the work they do. To sustain an orientation toward the writing table might depend on such work, while it erases the signs of that work as signs of its dependence. Such work is often experienced as "the lack of spare time,"²⁷ for example, the lack of time for oneself or for contemplation. Philosophy might even depend on the concealment of domestic labor and of the labor time that it takes to reproduce the very "materials" of home.

We can pose a simple question: who faces the writing table? Does the writing table have a face, which points it toward some bodies rather than others? Let's consider Adrienne Rich's account of writing a letter:

From the fifties and early sixties, I remember a cycle. It began when I had picked up a book or began trying to write a letter. . . . The child (or children) might be absorbed in busyness, in his own dream world; but as soon as he felt me gliding into a world which did not include him, he would come to pull at my hand, ask for help, punch at the typewriter keys. And I would feel his wants at such a moment as fraudulent, as an attempt moreover to defraud me of living even for fifteen minutes as myself.²⁸

We can see from the point of view of the mother, who is also a writer, poet, and philosopher, that giving attention to the objects of writing, facing those objects, becomes impossible: the children, even if they are behind you, literally pull you away. This loss of time for writing feels like a loss of your own time, as you are returned to the work of giving your attention to the children. One does not need to posit any essential difference to note that there is a political economy of attention: there is an uneven distribution of attention time among those who arrive at the writing table, which affects what they can do once they arrive (and of course, many do not even make it). For some, having time for writing, which means time to face the table upon which writing happens, becomes an orientation that is not available given the ongoing labor of other attachments, which literally pull them away. So whether we can sustain our orientation toward the writing table depends on other orientations, which affect what we can face at any given moment in time.

If orientations affect what bodies do, then they also affect how spaces take shape around certain bodies. The world takes shape by presuming certain bodies as given. If spaces extend bodies, then we could say that spaces extend the bodies that "tend" to inhabit them. So, for instance, if the action of writing is associated with the masculine body, then it is this body that tends to inhabit the space for writing. The space for writing, say, the study, then tends to extend such bodies and may even take their shape. Gender becomes naturalized as a property of bodies, objects, and spaces partly through the loop of this repetition, which leads bodies in some

directions more than others as if that direction came from within the body and explains which way it turns.

In a way, the writing table waits for the body of the writer. In waiting for the writer, the table waits for some bodies more than others. This waiting orients the table to a specific kind of body, the body that would "take up" writing. I have already described such a body as a masculine body, by evoking the gendered form of its occupation. Now clearly, gender is not "in" the table, or necessarily "in" the body that turns to the table. Gender is an effect of how bodies take objects up, which involves how they occupy space by being occupied in one way or another. We might note for instance in Heidegger's *Ontology* that the table as a thing on which we do things allows for different ways of being occupied. So Heidegger writes on the table, his wife sews, and his children play. What we do on the table is also about being given a place within a familiar order. Bodies are shaped by the work they do on the table, where work involves gendered forms of occupation.

Consider Charlotte Perkins Gilman's early work on home, where she speaks of the shaping of women's bodies through the way they inhabit domestic interiors. As she puts it:

See it in furnishing. A stone or block of wood to sit on, a hide to lie on, a shelf to put your food on. See that block of wood change under your eyes and crawl up history on its forthcoming legs—a stool, a chair, a sofa, a settee, and now the endless ranks of sittable furniture wherewith we fill the home to keep ourselves from the floor withal. . . . If you are confined at home you cannot walk much—therefore you must sit—especially if your task is a stationary one. So, to the home-bound woman came much sitting, and much sitting called for ever softer seats.²⁹

Gilman is writing here specifically about furnishings in the Orient, and she contrasts the soft bodies and chairs of this imagined interior with the domestic interiors in the West, which give women more mobility. Gilman shows us how orientations involve inhabiting certain bodily positions: sitting, walking, lying down, and so on. Such forms of occupation or of being occupied shape the furniture: the chairs becomes soft, to provide seating for the body that sits. In turn, the body becomes soft, as it occupies the soft seat, taking up the space made available by the seat. Such positions

become habitual: they are repeated, and in being repeated, they shape the body and what it can do. The more the body sits, the more it tends to be seated.

What a simple point: what we “do do” affects what we “can do.” This is not to argue that “doing” simply restricts capacities. In contrast, what we “do do” opens up and expands some capacities, although an “expansion” in certain directions might in turn restrict what we can do in others. The more we work certain parts of the body, the more work they can do. At the same time, the less we work other parts, the less they can do. So if gender shapes what we “do do,” then it shapes what we can do.

It is worth noting that Iris Marion Young’s phenomenological model of female embodiment places a key emphasis on the role of orientation. Indeed, Young argues that gender differences *are* differences in orientation. As she suggests, “Even in the most simple body orientations of men and women as they sit, stand, and walk, we can observe a typical difference in body style and extension.”³⁰ This is not to say that orientations are themselves simply given, or that they “cause” such differences. Rather orientations are an effect of differences as well as a mechanism for their reproduction. Young suggests that women have an “inhibited intentionality” in part because they do not get behind their bodies since women see their bodies as “objects” as well as “capacities” (35). Women may throw objects and are thrown by objects in such a way that they take up less space. To put it simply, we acquire the shape of how we throw as well as what we do. Spaces in turn are shaped by the bodies that tend to inhabit them given their tendencies.

And yet, it is not always decided which bodies inhabit which spaces, even when spaces extend the form of some bodies and not others. Women “do things” by claiming spaces that have not historically belonged to them, including the spaces marked out for writing. As Virginia Woolf shows us in *A Room of One’s Own*, for women to claim a space to write is a political act. Of course, there are women who write. We know this. Women have taken up spaces orientated toward writing. And yet, the woman writer remains just that: the woman writer, deviating from the somatic norm of “the writer” as such. So what happens when the woman writer takes up her pen? What happens when the study is not reproduced as a masculine domain by the collective repetition of such moments of deviation?

Tables might even appear differently if we follow such moments of deviation and the lines they create. For Virginia Woolf, the table appears with her writing on it, as a feminist message inscribed on paper: “I must ask you to imagine a room, like many thousands, with a window looking across people’s hats and vans and motor-cars to other windows, and on the table inside the room a blank sheet of paper on which was written in large letters Women and Fiction and no more.”³¹ The table is not simply what she faces but is the “site” upon which she makes her feminist point: that we cannot address the question of women and fiction without asking the prior question of whether women have space to write.

If making feminist points returns us to the table, then the terms of its appearance will be different. In Young’s *On Female Body Experience*, the table arrives into her writing in the following way: “The nick on the table here happened during that argument with my daughter” (159). Here the table records the intimacy of the relationship between mother and daughter; such intimacies are not “put to one side.” Tables for feminist writers might not bracket or put aside the intimacy of familial attachments. Such intimacies are at the front; they are “on the table” rather than behind it. We might even say that feminist tables are shaped by attachments, which affect the surfaces of tables and how tables surface in feminist writing.

Of course, feminist tables do not simply make gender the point of significance. Just recall the women of color press, *The Kitchen Table*. Such a press certainly uses the table to make a feminist point. The kitchen table provides the surface on which women tend to work. To use the table that supports domestic work to do political work (including the work that makes explicit the politics of domestic work) is a reorientation device. But such a description misses the point of this table.³² As a women of color press, *The Kitchen Table* reminds us that the work of the table involves racial and class-based divisions of labor. Middle-class white women could access the writing table, could turn their attention to this table, by relying on the domestic labor of black and working-class women. A feminist politics of the table cannot afford to lose sight of the political divisions between women who work. *The Kitchen Table* press, which Audre Lorde referred to as “The Table,”³³ was about generating a space for woman of color within feminism. The politics of the table turns us to the political necessity of clearing spaces in order that some bodies can work at the table. To arrive at the table takes time and requires painstaking labor for

those whose backgrounds mean that they do not inherit its place. It is through the labor of Black feminism that women of color can claim “the table” as their own.

So, yes, orientations matter. Those who are “out of place” have to secure a place that is not already given. Such work makes “the table” reappear as an object. The table becomes a disorientation device, making things lose their place, which means the loss of coherence of a certain world. Political work hence reshapes the very surfaces of bodies and worlds. Or we could say that bodies resurface when they turn the tables on the world that keeps things in place.

Notes

This essay is drawn from the first chapter of Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, and has been revised and adapted for this volume.

- 1 For an articulation of this idea, see Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity.” I have elsewhere questioned the way articulations of so-called new materialism have relied on a foundational gesture whereby they constitute earlier work (especially other feminist work) written during the “cultural turn” as against matter, and opposed to related tropes of materiality such as biology or the real. See Ahmed, “Imaginary Prohibitions.”
- 2 Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book*, 165–66.
- 3 Schutz and Luckmann, *The Structure of the Lifeworld*, 36.
- 4 Husserl, *Ideas*, 101.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 66.
- 7 Husserl, *Ideas*, vol. 1, 107.
- 8 Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 20.
- 9 Husserl, *Ideas*, vol. 1, 102.
- 10 Husserl attends to the temporality of the background via the notion of the “internal horizon,” which he develops throughout the corpus of his work. So the “now” of perception involves retention: it involves the “just past,” which is “before” the “now” but evoked as “before” only in the “now.” This reminds us that intentionality (to be directed toward something that does not reveal itself “at once”) involves a complex temporality, in which the present already exceeds itself: “Even if I stop at perception, I still have the full consciousness of the thing, just as I already have it at the first glance when I see it as this thing. In seeing I always ‘mean’ it with all the sides which are no way given to me, even in the form of the intuitive, anticipatory presentifications. Thus

every perception has, ‘for consciousness’ a horizon belonging to its object.” Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 158. Phenomenology in its turn to the present of what we perceive does return us to what is “behind” in a temporal as well as spatial sense. For Husserl this is primarily described as “time consciousness,” but we can see an important connection between a phenomenology of perception and a more materialist conception of histories that are “behind” or even at the “back” of what is “presented” or in the present.

- 11 As Gilles Deleuze puts it, following Spinoza, “You do not know beforehand what a mind or body can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination.” See Deleuze, “Ethnology,” 627. We can add: we do not yet know what a writer can do, let alone the table, once they get near enough to each other. Yes, writing might happen. Or it might not. We don’t always know what will happen if writing does not happen: whether the “not” feels like a block, or whether it provides an empty space that appears as an invitation to fill with other things. You might doodle, creating some rather odd kind of impressions. And if writing is what happens, then we don’t know what lines will be created on the paper, which lies on the surface of the table, between skin and wood, or on whatever materials happen to come into contact. In due course, I will return to the “can do” and suggest that what bodies “do do” restricts capacities in the present even if it does not “decide” exactly what happens.
- 12 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology, The Marx-Engels Reader*, 170.
- 13 Marx, *Capital* (Moscow, 1887), 50.
- 14 This is not to say that matter comes to matter only given the work of human labor. Such an argument would make the human *into the center of things*, as the absent presence around which all things were centered. Other kinds of labor shape how objects might come to surface in this way or that. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a pebble and what makes a pebble a pebble. As he puts it, “Beyond a certain range of their changes, they would cease to be this pebble or this shell, they would even cease to be a pebble or a shell.” See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 161. I have often been struck by pebble beaches, for instance, when I imagine how they are becoming sand but a becoming that is not available to consciousness or that has not arrived, in the present. The pebble becomes sand as an effect of time. The pebble could be seen as “becoming sand,” but we could not see this becoming simply on the surface of the pebble. We could even see sand as a “having been pebble,” but that would also point us beyond what is available in the present. What does time do, if not make available the possibility of seeing that which is not in view? Time is also occupied not only in the sense that we do something with it but also in how it is available to us through what we do. In time, the pebble may become sand; it ceases to have the characteristics that make it recogniz-

able as a pebble. But the pebble acquires its shape through contact; and it is this contact which reshapes the pebble such that it is becoming something "other" than what it is. Time "gives form," which suggests that "matter" is not inert or given but is always in a process of "materializing." The pebble is shaped by its contact with water, and the waves that pound it, which made it "it" (and not a rock), also shape its becoming something other than what it is in the present. The object assumes the form of contact, as a contact that takes place in time, but is also an effect of time. The arrival of the object takes time and involves contact with other objects, which keeps the future open to that which has yet to emerge.

- 15 It is important that we contest the matter / form hierarchy, which locates what is dynamic in form and leaves matter "for dead." As feminist philosophers have shown us, this binary is gendered: women have been associated with matter and men with form, such that masculinity becomes the gift of life by giving form to matter. See Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 172; Butler, *Bodies That Matter*; and Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, 121.
- 16 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 149.
- 17 Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things," 34.
- 18 I am very grateful to Paul Harrison who directed me towards *Ontology* and Heidegger's table during a seminar I gave at Durham University in October 2005, "Lines, Points and Other Impressions." In the first version of my chapter on phenomenology and tables in *Queer Phenomenology*, I relied on the example of the hammer offered in *Being and Time* and made my own connections between the hammer and the table. It was uncanny to discover that the example of the hammer in *Being and Time* was a substitute for the table in *Ontology*. As John Van Buren suggests in his translator's notes: "What had also dropped out was Heidegger's powerful fifteen-page phenomenological example of 'tarrying for a while' in his home, 'being-in-a-room' there, and the 'sewing of his wife', the 'playing of his children', his own 'writing', and their daily meals at the table in this room. This central example was replaced by 'the hammer', and what survived of it was a cursory mention of a 'table' in a 'room' with 'sewing' and 'writing' equipment on it." See Van Buren, "Translator's Notes" to Heidegger, *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, 92. How fitting that when I was writing about a hammer I was "really" writing about a table.
- 19 Heidegger, *Ontology*, 20.
- 20 Husserl, *Ideas*, vol. 1, 130.
- 21 For a discussion of this idea, see Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 36.
- 22 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72, 83.
- 23 Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitutions," 406.
- 24 For a good discussion of house memories focusing on the kitchen table, see Carsten, *After Kinship*, 31.

- 25 See, for example, Bordo, *Flight to Objectivity*; and Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance*.
- 26 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 116.
- 27 Davies, "Responsibilities and Daily Life," 141.
- 28 Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 23.
- 29 Gilman, *The Home*, 27–28.
- 30 Young, *On Female Body Experience*, 32.
- 31 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 24.
- 32 Here, I am critiquing my own reading of The Kitchen Table in *Queer Phenomenology*, which uses this description and hence misses the importance of this press as a women of color press. See Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 61.
- 33 De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 277.

Sonia Kruks

Simone de Beauvoir: Engaging Discrepant Materialisms

“Materialism” is today an essentially contested concept, and its usage in a variety of neo-Marxist, feminist, and gender theories is radically discrepant. Similarly its cognates, such as material, materiality, or materialization, carry diverse and often apparently incommensurate meanings. In what follows I bring into engagement, through a discussion of the work of Simone de Beauvoir, several genres of theory that focus with radical political intent on materialism and its cognates. One is a set of Marxist-inflected, structuralist discourses in which “materialism” refers to the production of social structures (widely conceived to include large-scale social institutions, norms, and so forth, as well as those structures that organize economic production) as effects of human practices. These discourses are “realist” in approach, insofar as they posit both the material world and human beings qua material organisms as real existents, as having import irrespective of the conceptual lenses through which we describe them; but they are also “social constructionist” insofar as consciousness is, in varying degrees, seen as the effect of the organization of practices to meet material needs.¹

Another genre of “materialist” theory, one broadly informed by poststructuralism, focuses on the production of “material” bodies, or their “materialization,” through discourse and discursively constituted performance. In a

more nominalist vein, it accounts for subjective experience and identity above all as effects of such discursive production.² What both of these genres have in common, however, is that they proceed (to borrow the terms from Elizabeth Grosz) “from the outside in” rather than “from the inside out.”³ That is, they emphasize the ways in which subjectivity arises as the reflex or expression of social practices, or as the effect of discourses. Although thinkers within both of these genres acknowledge that “outside” and “inside” remain mutually implicated, still for the most part these approaches privilege the power of social structures and practices (whether they be based in economic or discourse “production”) as constitutive of the “interior” domains of subjectivity, intentionality, and meaning. Thus, their many profound disagreements (notably over the status of the “real”) notwithstanding, these neo-Marxist and poststructuralist theoretical approaches have in common a constructivist account of subjectivity.

In this they stand broadly in contrast to another genre of “materialist” discourse, one that emerges from within the phenomenological tradition. Phenomenology tends to proceed in the opposite direction. It privileges the “inside,” or the experiential, and it often attends to the phenomena of consciousness without regard to their possible “outside” constitutive sources. However, such phenomena do not arise for disembodied consciousnesses, and so some phenomenologies also engage with questions of their own about “materiality.” Critically engaging claims (for example, those of sociobiology) that biological differences are not only “real” but also causally explanatory of differences in social roles, these phenomenological approaches seek to move beyond mind-body dualism and explore the paradoxes and ambiguities of human experience as “embodied subjectivity”: as at once organic or “factic” body and consciousness.⁴ In its more “existential” versions, phenomenology also considers how we may theorize human freedom in the face of the facticity (the apparently “outside” or “objective” aspects) of both bodily and socially structured dimensions of experience.

Recently, feminist and queer theory have been among the key sites for a series of often contentious encounters among proponents of such diverse genres of materialist theory. Debates about “biological essentialism” versus “social constructionism,” about “sex” versus “gender,” or about whether to “displace” one of these terms by the other or to “destabilize” both have waxed furious. In this essay I propose, through returning to the

work of Simone de Beauvoir, that these discrepant genres of materialist theorizing may be brought into a more fruitful relationship than their respective proponents are apt to pursue. Rather than reductively privileging one genre of materiality, I seek to explicate the interconstituent qualities of diverse “materialities” that shape human practices, selves, and social formations. For only such an approach may adequately capture the complexities of human life and account for the phenomena of social oppression with which feminist and other radical social practices are concerned.

Locating Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir is most often read as working in the last of the genres of materialist theory mentioned above: phenomenology, and particularly existential phenomenology. Indeed, this is where she explicitly locates herself in *The Second Sex*,⁵ and her project, especially in the second volume, is to present a phenomenology of the “lived experience” through which, as she famously puts it, “one is not born but becomes a woman.”⁶ Furthermore, qua existentialist, she is concerned with exploring the constraints on and possibilities for freedom that accompany such a “becoming.” However, I argue, Beauvoir does not work exclusively in this tradition. Rather, she works in and across the interstices between phenomenology and a Marxist-inflected and also a culturally oriented structuralist materialism.

Although she rejects a determinist “historical materialism,” such as she critically presents through her reading of Engels,⁷ Beauvoir’s work is also profoundly attuned to the sensibilities of the “early” Marx: the Marx of the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.” Few commentators have remarked upon the fact that at the very end of *The Second Sex* Beauvoir approvingly quotes from this Marx—a Marx whose vision radically historicizes nature and naturalizes history—as precisely summing up her own position. “One could not state it better,” she declares after citing him.⁸ Beauvoir’s self-proclaimed affinity with Marx should make us pause. It should remind us that volume 1 of *The Second Sex* (“Facts and Myths”) focuses on the “production” of woman as man’s inferiorized other. It explores the social production of woman’s otherness across the history of human practices and institutions, as well as in more discursive arenas such as myth and literature.

Beauvoir’s attention to Marx also invites a reading of *The Second Sex* as a

precursor to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), the neo-Marxist magnum opus of Sartre’s later years⁹—a reading I develop below. In the *Critique*, Sartre attempts explicitly to conjoin his earlier existential phenomenology (as set out, above all, in *Being and Nothingness* [1943]) with a Marxist-inspired neostructuralism. He sets out to show how what he calls “practico-inert” entities, the products of our own individual and collective production, come to impinge on freedom and to alter our actions and—indeed—our very being as practical subjects. All human activities are mediated by, and in the process are altered by, a world of material things, he argues. They cannot but take place within a world of practico-inert entities which we create from the resources of nature through a multitude of practices, through what Marx had called praxis.

“Reification,” that is, the materialization of human activity, of praxis, in tangible objects, is an essential characteristic of the human world, yet it also represents a fundamental alienation of our activity. For the objects we create through praxis always act back against us coercively: “Man has to struggle not only against nature, and against the social environment which has produced him, and against other men, but also against his own action as it becomes other. . . . a permanent anti-praxis is a new and necessary moment of praxis.”¹⁰ Practico-inert entities, the products of our praxis, produce their own demands or “exigencies.” They drain our freedom from us, reinscribing in us the inertia and passivity of matter, as they constrain and compel our future activity. For example, for a house to remain habitable and meet our need for shelter, we are compelled endlessly to meet the demands that it, itself a product of prior human praxis, now imposes upon us. It must be “heated, swept, repainted, etc; otherwise it deteriorates. This *vampire object* [my emphasis] constantly absorbs human action, lives on blood taken from man and finally lives in symbiosis with him” (169).

Practico-inert entities may be very diverse. They range from commodities and artifacts to the built environment, to the reified and reifying social institutions we (unintentionally) create, and to the language and forms of discourse in which we find our meanings alienated.¹¹ They also include “series.” These are the social ensembles in which we passively participate with others, and in which each unwittingly becomes, through others, his or her own other. Thus we most often encounter the praxis of others above all as the “alteration” of our own, as draining away our freedom and

as distorting or “deviating” our intentions: human relations are also invested by alienation.

Ten years after Sartre published *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Beauvoir published *Old Age* (1970).¹² The book is in many ways an analogue to *The Second Sex*, but it also breaks important new theoretical ground. For now the Marxist-inspired materialist aspects of Beauvoir’s thinking, already present in *The Second Sex*, are deepened as she incorporates Sartre’s fuller elaborations of her own earlier insights.¹³ By rearticulating Sartre’s analyses for her own distinctive ends, Beauvoir now more fully addresses the overarching structural social relations of modern Western society through which forms of oppression (here of the aged, but also of other categories of people) are perpetuated. But in both works Beauvoir focuses our attention on the confluences, mutual mediations, and interconstituencies of diverse forms of materiality — on bodies, the structures of worked matter in which we live and act, and the cultural and discursive media we produce — and she thus suggests a route beyond the discrepant and frequently reductionist genres of materialist theory that are pervasive today.

The Second Sex

Although early second-wave feminist interpretations of Beauvoir tended — usually critically — to read *The Second Sex* as simply applying the framework of Sartre’s existential phenomenology to women, more recent scholarship on Beauvoir, including my own, has established the important ways in which her thought is distinct from that of the early Sartre.¹⁴ These include her greater attention to the lived body and how it inflects particular lives, to the interdependence of human freedoms, and to the ways in which concrete situations of oppression, born of large-scale structures, institutions, and dominant discourses, may impinge on, or even suppress, the human potentiality for freedom. Thus Beauvoir has increasingly become a resource within feminist theory, especially for those who seek to defend feminism from the reductive excesses that often accompany the poststructuralist “death of the subject” without thereby reverting to forms of biological essentialism. As Toril Moi has recently put it, “to find a third way for feminist theory, one that steers a course between the Scylla of traditional essentialism and biologism and the Charybdis of idealist obses-

sion with ‘discourse’ and ‘construction’ . . . Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophy of feminism is an obvious cornerstone.”¹⁵

As Moi and others argue, Beauvoir’s account of the body “as a situation” enables feminist theory to move beyond the antinomies of sex and gender, biology and social construction, nature and culture. For Beauvoir eschews the determinism that may implicitly pervade radical discourse-constructionism as much as biological reductionism. Against reductionisms of any kind, Beauvoir also enables us to restore the significance of freedom to feminism. Beauvoir shows, as Moi puts it, that “just as the world constantly makes me, I constantly make my self the woman I am . . . a situation is not an ‘external’ structure that imposes itself on the individual subject, but rather an irreducible amalgam of the freedom (projects) of that subject and the conditions in which freedom finds itself. The body as a situation is the concrete body experienced as meaningful, and socially and historically situated.”¹⁶

However, we may also experience our bodies as sites of profound alienation, and Moi attends less fully to this aspect of embodiment in her retrieval of Beauvoir. We may experience several modalities of such alienation. We may experience our bodies as physically limiting our abilities to carry out our projects, as the origin of an “I cannot.” Or, in their uncontrollable functions and demands, we may experience them as sources of an “alien vitality”¹⁷ or as sources of an “alien” suffering. In addition, we may also experience them as sites of our social objectification. Such objectification may emerge in two ways: in interpersonal interactions with particular individuals or through our location in large-scale social structures and practices, including discursive practices, which function as a generalized “other.” Most often, especially for socially inferiorized groups such as women, it is phenomenologically impossible to separate out these various modalities of alienation: the body is lived as a failure, or a problem, in which physical and social qualities blend. “Physiological facts,” Beauvoir insists, have significance only within specific social contexts so that, for example, the relative “weakness” of women’s muscles “is revealed as such only in the light of the ends man proposes, the instruments he has available, and the laws he establishes.”¹⁸ Similarly, Beauvoir argues, menstruation is an involuntary bodily function (an “alien vitality”) to which most women must attend in one way or another, but the disgust and shame that

generally accompany its onset in young girls is integral to their realization of their subordinate social status (315).

For Beauvoir, the particular problem of “becoming a woman” is that one is always engaged in a project in which one’s potentialities as a free, agentic human being can never escape the facticities of one’s organic body and other life-attributes, including a discursive and social regime through which one is subjected to systematically inferiorized otherness. It is this last (variants of which are, of course, also experienced by those men who do not conform to the predominant—white, middle-class, young, healthy, heterosexual—Western norms of manhood) which makes woman the “second” or subordinate sex, man’s “other.” Thus Beauvoir’s concern is not only phenomenologically to disclose such experiences of inferiorization but also to give an account of their social genesis and means of perpetuation.

In an appreciative but critical engagement with Toril Moi, Iris Young argued, shortly before her death, that feminism—and indeed critical social theory more broadly—should move beyond its current concerns with “issues of experience, identity, and subjectivity” because these have tended problematically to narrow its political focus and efficacy.¹⁹ It needs also to identify and explain the institutions, social relations, and large-scale, or “macro” social structures that produce injustices and other harms to groups such as women (or, as I will discuss later, the aged). Young agrees with Moi that “the concept of the lived body offers more refined tools for theorizing sexed subjectivity, and the experiences of differently situated men and women, than does the more blunt category of gender” (19). However, working from a perspective more inflected by Marxism than is Moi’s, Young argues that we need to think more systematically about the “structures of constraint” that operate independently of the individual intentions of either men or women (21). Without attending to such structural realities as the sexual division of labor, normative heterosexuality, and gendered hierarchies of power, we truncate the possibility of a politics of radical transformation (22). If we fail to take account of these realities, we cannot adequately articulate “how persons live out their positioning in social structures along with the opportunities and constraints they produce,” for example, how “each person takes up the constrained possibilities that gender structures offer in their own way, forming their own habits as variations on those possibilities, or actively trying to resist or

refigure them” (25–26). I read Young’s appeal here as one to investigate the possible confluences among the diverse genres of materialist theory that I have briefly sketched and to explore interconstituencies among forms of materiality that are usually considered only singly and reductively. However, if we return to Beauvoir herself and examine her entire text, I want to propose, we find her engaged—by 1949!—in exactly the kind of synthetic project that Young urges.

In an earlier paper, “Gender as Seriality,” Young herself explicitly draws on Sartre’s notions of seriality and the practico-inert (which Sartre developed primarily to investigate social class relations) in order to explicate gender as a set of oppressive structures in which women find themselves located irrespective of their subjective stances or experiences.²⁰ In this paper Young persuasively argues that, by using Sartre’s theoretical framework, it is possible to avoid difference-erasing forms of essentialism that often attend generalizing about “women” and yet still retain “women” as a significant social and political category. The Sartrean notion of seriality enables one to explain how, as members of the series “women,” certain individuals are unintentionally linked such that they will alter each other’s actions, each one becoming an other to herself, irrespective of whether or not they share an “inner” subjective sense of identity. Rather, they are, as Sartre puts it, unified “in exteriority.” Whether or not they realize it, they are unified by virtue of their shared location in certain practico-inert structures of gender, for example a particular division of labor, or the institutions that enforce the norms of heterosexuality. Thus, says Young, at this level, saying “I am a woman” is to state an anonymous fact that locates me in a series of others. “It means that I check one box rather than another on my driver’s license application. . . . As I utter the phrase, I experience a serial interchangeability between myself and others” (30). Thus we should not conceive gender structures as defining attributes of individuals, as fundamental to their identity, but rather as “the material and social facts that each individual must deal with and relate to.” Similarly other structures, like class, race, or age, “do not primarily name attributes of individuals, but practico-inert necessities that condition their lives”: they are “forms of seriality . . . material structures arising from people’s historically congealed, institutionalized actions and expectations that position and limit individuals in determinate ways with which they must deal” (31).

Although in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir does not yet use the conceptual

framework of the “practico-inert” and “seriality,” this is presaged in her account of the familial, economic, legal, political, and other frameworks through which one “becomes a woman.” *The Second Sex* is not only a phenomenology of the lived experience of women’s oppression, for Beauvoir is also concerned with questions about how that oppression is perpetuated through social structures, institutions, and practices that women must engage with as the “givens” of their lives. “Yes,” she writes, “women on the whole are today inferior to men, that is, their situation affords them fewer possibilities.”²¹ Indeed, right from the introduction, Beauvoir introduces her claim that “exterior” social realities ineluctably suffuse individual women’s lives.

Reflecting on her opening question, “What is a woman?” Beauvoir firmly rejects nominalism: women are not, she insists, “merely the human beings arbitrarily designated by the word woman” (xx). To say there are only human beings, irrespective of sex or race, is “a flight from reality,” for “to go for a walk with one’s eyes open is enough to demonstrate that humanity is divided into two categories of individuals whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests, and occupations are manifestly different. Perhaps these differences are superficial, perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that right now they do most strikingly exist” (xx–xxi; TA). That is, they have phenomenological reality. They exist as experienced phenomena, as those life-structuring realities within which certain human beings discover themselves to be located, and from which they cannot extricate themselves by an individual act of will. But how to explain these phenomena? Beyond the antinomies of a realist essentialism and a constructionist nominalism another account is necessary. Thus, in her discussion of Freudian psychoanalysis, for example, Beauvoir criticizes Freud for taking for granted what needs to be explained. Freud, she asserts, wrongly essentializes sexuality by taking it as “an irreducible datum” (46), whereas it is only in light of social practices and values and through the individual existential choices that “assume” these that sexuality takes on its meanings.²² How we experience ourselves as sexual beings, what values we affirm in our sexuality, will be at once idiosyncratic and socially structured. She writes,

Across the separation of existents, existence is all one: it reveals itself in similar bodies, thus there will be constants in the relations between the

ontological and the sexual. At a given epoch, the technologies, the economic and social structure of a collectivity [*collectivité*], will reveal to all its members an identical world. There will also be a relation of sexuality to social forms; individuals, located in similar conditions, will grasp similar significations from what is given. This similarity does not ground a rigorous universality, but it does enable us to rediscover general types within individual histories. (46–47; TA)

Sexuality, then, is at once general and particular. Epoch-wide “technologies and economic and social structures” will permeate particular experiences. Thus, without asserting universal claims, we may still delineate general descriptions. For example, the prohibition of abortion and contraception in France in the 1940s profoundly suffused the sexual experiences of most women, as well as the meanings of motherhood (484). Thus Beauvoir infamously begins the chapter of *The Second Sex* on “The Mother” with a discussion of abortion, the prohibition of which made a free choice of maternity virtually impossible. Although there are “individual histories,” and women’s lives and experiences are each particular, we see here how women are also a “collectivity.” That is, they are members of a series, who, embedded within the same social structures (legal, religious, medical, familial, and so forth), will discover themselves to belong to — and be constrained by — an “identical world.”

In her use of the term “collectivity” (*collectivité*) in this passage, Beauvoir already anticipates what, in the *Critique*, Sartre will refer to as a “collective” (*collectif*). By a “collective,” Sartre refers to a “series” of individuals who are unified passively, externally to their own intentions and practices, or sometimes even to their knowledge, through their involuntary location in one and the same practico-inert field of structural constraints. Such a “collective” (in contradistinction to what Sartre will call a “group”) does not produce shared internal and intentional bonds among its members. Instead, through their insertion in the series, each member alters the significance of the action of the others and so, through them, of his or her own action: “each is something other than himself and behaves like someone else, who in turn is other than himself.”²³ Thus women, as Beauvoir characterizes them (anticipating Young by many years), are a series. Each woman, having to accommodate to the “identical world” in which she is situated, becomes, through others, other than herself in a rela-

tion of passive, “exterior” unification. As Beauvoir observes, women “do not say ‘we’ . . . they live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic conditions, and social standing to certain men — fathers or husbands — more firmly than they are to other women.”²⁴

Although Beauvoir underestimates the degree to which women have historically formed bonded groups, her point remains broadly valid: to “become a woman” is to be involuntarily located in various social structures and, through their mediations, to be implicated in serial relations that one has not chosen and yet which one still participates in perpetuating. Thus, already in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir clearly anticipates Sartre’s later project, in the *Critique*, of integrating existential phenomenology (with its emphasis on individual lived experience, freedom, and responsibility) with a Marxist-inflected structural analysis of the material sources of alienation and social oppression.

That Beauvoir views women’s inferiorization as emerging through the interconstituencies of social structure and lived, embodied experience is also evident in the organization of *The Second Sex*. Its two volumes should not be read as merely sequential but rather as dialectical. Each sets out, from the opposite pole, to show how socially and discursively produced identities will strongly suffuse subjectivity while never being entirely constitutive of it. To “become a woman” is to “assume” an inferiorized social identity that is not of one’s own making and yet with which one does not wholly coincide, to which one is not reducible. Book 1, “Facts and Myths,” describes the power-freighted construction of women from “without,” that is, in masculinist discourses, practices, and beliefs: “I shall discuss first of all the points of view taken on woman by biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism. Next I shall try to show exactly how ‘feminine reality’ has been constituted, why woman has been defined as the Other — and what have been the consequences from man’s point of view” (xxxv; TA). Book 2, “from woman’s point of view” (xxxv), next develops a phenomenology of the “lived experience” of “becoming” a woman, an inferiorized Other, within the institutions, practices, and personal relationships that structure and support male dominance. The final section of the book, “Toward Liberation,” discusses the “independent woman.” Her struggles serve, however, to reveal yet more starkly the weight of domination since it is when it is most resisted that oppression becomes the most apparent.

But although Beauvoir attends at length to the structural dimensions of women’s subordination in *The Second Sex*, she still lacks a sufficiently developed conceptual framework to explicate their effects. By contrast, in *Old Age* Beauvoir now possesses, drawing from Sartre’s *Critique*, more fully honed tools with which to deepen her own earlier insights about practico-inert structures, serial social relations, and the ways in which they both constrain and are assumed by the self. Moreover, as she reflects on the processes of physical decline that accompany old age, Beauvoir explores in greater depth than in *The Second Sex* the experiences of the body as a limit, as an “I cannot.” The brute facticity of a body that is crippled or paralyzed, for example, raises especially pressing questions both about the limits to the discursive materialization of bodies and about the extent to which seriality and material structures of constraint are constitutive of the alienating experiences of the aged and others.

Old Age

The treatment of the aged in modern society is “barbarous”; it is a “scandal,” so Beauvoir declares at the beginning of *Old Age*.²⁵ Moreover, the situation of the aged is subject to a “conspiracy of silence.” Indeed (replicating the nominalist assertion that there is no such thing as “woman”) many assert: “old age, it doesn’t exist! It’s just that some people are less young than others.”²⁶ But just as Beauvoir insists, in the opening paragraphs of *The Second Sex*, on the phenomenological “fact” that women do exist, so also do the aged. But the questions, “what is old age?” and “what is an aged person?” will prove to be as complex to answer as the question posed at the very beginning of *The Second Sex*: “what is a woman?” They also provoke the further questions: how far is society at large responsible for the degradations of old age, and what is and is not “ineluctable” in the condition of the aged (10, 541)? How far, she asks, is old age attributable to the organic body’s decline; how far to such “existential” factors as the impingement of the weight of one’s past on one’s projects and one’s shrinking horizon for future action; how far to the multiple social practices, structures, institutions, and discursive regimes that constitute the series of “the aged” as inferior others?

Far more than in her treatment of women, Beauvoir frames the oppressive situation of the aged (by whom she means for the most part aged

men) as structured also by capitalist society.²⁷ In a for-profit economy those who are no longer economically productive cease to be valued, and a prior life of alienated labor produces old people who have no existential resources to enjoy the enforced “leisure” of retirement. Indeed, with strong echoes of Marx’s notion of the proletariat as a universal class, Beauvoir ends *Old Age* by suggesting that the treatment of the aged “exposes the failure of our entire civilization.” More generous pensions and so forth — although she demands them — would not be sufficient to make old age meaningful for most: “It is the whole system that is at issue and our claim cannot be otherwise than radical — change life itself” (543).

But although many of the vicissitudes of old age are structurally produced, they are also “assumed,” or interiorized, by those with physically aging bodies and for whom the temporal horizon for actions is increasingly truncated. The aged bear exceptionally heavily the interconstituent facticities of their organic decline and their social inferiorization. Beauvoir talks of the “circularity” of their situation, in which organic, social, and existential elements merge and reinforce each other. Invoking the need for a dialectical investigation, she insists: “An analytical description of the various aspects of old age is therefore not enough: each reacts upon the others and is at the same time affected by them, and it is in the indeterminate movement of this circularity that old age must be grasped” (9; TA).

Old Age is similarly organized to *The Second Sex*, except for the significant absence of an equivalent to the latter’s final treatment of the “Liberated Woman.” Part 1, “Le point de vue de l’extériorité” (The Viewpoint of Exteriority),²⁸ covers the “data” on aging offered by various academic disciplines. Part 2, “L’être dans le monde” (Being-in-the-World), offers “from within,” (*en intériorité*), a phenomenology of the experience of becoming aged, drawing extensively on memoirs and letters, surveys, and contemporary interview-based research.²⁹ In the preface Beauvoir writes as follows:

Every human situation can be viewed from without [*en extériorité*] — as seen from the point of view of an outsider — or from within [*en intériorité*], in so far as the subject assumes and at the same time transcends it. For another, the aged man is an object of knowledge; for himself, he has a lived experience of his condition. In the first part of the book I shall adopt the first view point: I shall examine what biology, anthro-

pology, history and contemporary sociology have to tell us about old age. In the second I shall do my best to describe the way in which the aged man interiorizes his relationship with his body, with time, and with others.³⁰

As with *The Second Sex*, the two parts of the book should be read conjointly, rather than sequentially, since they constitute two poles of a dialectical investigation. But Beauvoir now has the resources to better flesh out her earlier methods, having absorbed from Sartre’s *Critique* a fuller account of how the “practico-inert” and “seriality” are produced. However, unlike the later Sartre, Beauvoir still integrates into her account a persistent attention to the lived body.³¹

In Beauvoir’s investigation of old age, the demands of the body in its organic decline, its objectification in the series of “the aged,” and the effect on the individual of large-scale practico-inert institutions such as the market economy, family structure, law, or the system of medical care are revealed as interconstituent. Old age appears to come to us “in exteriority” in several ways: through other individuals and, more generally, from others through our instantiation in the series of “the aged”; from the “alien” facticities of our own bodies; and from our relationship to time and the ways our own past practices and styles of action now weigh on us as forms of the practico-inert. I will discuss each aspect in turn, although Beauvoir’s point is, of course, that they are inseparably “interiorized” or assumed. They give rise to an embodied, lived experience of old age that is generally one of alienation, pervaded by misery, anxiety, and a declining capacity for meaningful action.

Old age comes to us through others from the discovery that, without having chosen such an identity, we belong to the “social category” of old persons. That is, we discover we are both constituted within, and are ourselves a constituting element of, the series of those whom, no longer having a useful social function, modern society designates as “pure objects” — useless, ugly, not worthy of respect.³² We initially realize we are becoming “old” (just as a young girl discovers she is becoming “a woman”) through the words and actions of others, for we do not feel old “inside.” Thus even if our bodies begin to suffer from various disabilities of age, such as rheumatism, we will not see these as symptoms of “old age” until we have, through others, interiorized and assumed that condition. Until the inter-

vention of others, “we fail to see that [such symptoms] represent a new status. We remain what we were, with the rheumatism as something additional” (285).

Old age comes to us, then, “as the point of view of the other,” as “the other within us” (286). It is always a shock to find oneself so designated, and we do not accept it willingly (288). “We are obliged,” however, “to assume a reality which is indubitably our own even though it comes to us from without and remains ungraspable. There is an irresolvable contradiction between the private evidence that assures our unchanging quality and the objective certainty of our transformation. We can only oscillate between them” (290; TA). Although the “onset” of old age — the time when we come to realize we are “old” — may occur suddenly, through a particular encounter, or more gradually through multiple experiences, either way it takes place within the structuring power of the practico-inert field: the social practices, institutions, and discourses that shape old age. “In our society the elderly person is marked as such by custom, by the behaviour of others and by vocabulary itself: he must take up this reality. There is an infinite number of ways of doing so, but not one of them will allow me to coincide with the reality that I assume” (291; TA).

The aged — like women — are not only the “other,” they are the inferiorized other. Why? In all societies, Beauvoir suggests, younger adults seek to distinguish themselves from the aged because they fear their own old age. But in modern Western society, where productivity, profit, and the cult of novelty (380–82) are the most prevalent values, once retired (or “redundant”), the elderly are (with the exception of the very wealthy) consistently treated as subhuman. The aged do not become “unproductive” only, or necessarily, through physical or intellectual decline. For it is by current criteria of efficiency that their speed of performance is deemed inadequate or their skills outdated. Retirement is often an enforced and brutally abrupt passage into old age, and for many retirement presents a profound existential crisis. Since in modern society “a man defines his identity by his calling and his pay” (266), retirement constitutes a sudden destruction of prior identity, and it offers very few opportunities to re-define oneself other than through assuming one’s membership in the despised series of “the aged.” Retirement means “losing one’s place in society, one’s dignity and almost one’s reality” (266). The fall into acute poverty that so often accompanies retirement compounds these tenden-

cies, making it harder to go out and participate in other kinds of social activities even when one still has the physical capacity and desire to do so. Thus, poverty contributes profoundly to the isolation that is one of the greatest scourges of old age (270).

Each isolated and each “the same,” the elderly are passively unified by the social institutions and practices that serialize them in the collective of “the aged.” Powerlessness is thus their common hallmark. Apart from a small elite (partly cushioned by their wealth), powerlessness and its correlatives — a despised social status and a demeaning dependency — are both the objective condition and the pervasive lived experience of the aged. Dispersed and serialized, excluded from public activities and spaces, they have no capacity for organized resistance. Individually, in their isolation, they may also become vulnerable to exploitation and abuse at the hands of those on whom they must depend, for these macrolevel structural realities will also suffuse their particular relationships with their children or care-givers.

But age does not come to us from “without,” through seriality, alone. In approaching old age, we may also make the startling discovery that our bodies, in their brute physical facticity, are “other.” “I am my body,” yet in old age my lived body becomes, paradoxically, “other” than myself. This is not only, as for women, because of its meaning for others.³³ For I increasingly encounter it more immediately as the source of an unambiguous “I cannot,” or as a source of pain and suffering that impinges on my intentions and colors my experience of the world. Although its particular significances will depend on the social context, the aged are “subject to a biological fate,” Beauvoir writes.³⁴ The aging body undergoes a process of “biological decay” (443) that must eventually bring about a decline in activity and reduce the possibility of enacting one’s projects. Even without the presence of illness there develops “a ‘fatigability’ that spares none” (28). “The coefficient of adversity in things rises: stairs are harder to climb, distances longer to travel, streets more dangerous to cross, parcels heavier to carry” (304; TA). Thus, the body is increasingly encountered as an alien presence, as an “I cannot,” as an “object” that blocks my projects. We find that instead of being an instrument “the body becomes an obstacle” (317; TA). In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir can conceive of a hypothetical society in which having a female or a male body would not make a very significant difference to one’s given life-possibilities and where neither

privilege nor oppression would follow from one's sex, and we can conceive of societies in which such attributes as one's skin color, religion, or language would not oppressively delimit a life at all. But we cannot generally conceive of old age without its accompanying inexorable decline of organic bodies.

Beauvoir begins the first part of *Old Age*, "The Viewpoint of Exteriority," with a chapter on the biology of aging. Drawing on extensive medical literatures of the time, in which aging is presented as an objective process, she concurs that real biological changes mark the aging process: cellular regeneration slows, hair whitens, skin wrinkles, teeth fall out, muscular strength declines, and for women, menopause ends reproductive capacity (25–28). Such phenomena are not primarily "materialized" by discourse. Beauvoir would have objected strongly to Donna Haraway's appropriation of her famous statement that "one is not born a woman, one becomes one" to legitimize the alleged "co-text": "One is not born an organism. Organisms are made."³⁵ For, contra Haraway's discourse-reductionism, Beauvoir insists that organic bodies do have indubitable facticities that may impinge on our ability to act. Even if we could isolate such facticities from their social context, we would still have to say that in old age one's relationship to one's body becomes more and more one of alienation: "my body" is "me," yet "it" constrains me, "it" dominates me, "it" pains me. Beauvoir quotes extensively from memoirs and other sources to show how pervasive the lived experience of the body as an impediment to freedom rather than as "the instrument" of one's projects becomes for the aged. But, of course, such facticities of the body are never lived in a "pure" form, and there are always social processes and discursive forms that imbue bodily experience and shape its meaning. For example, muscular weakness may be a real, objective barrier to certain kinds of actions we wish to undertake, but a contempt for muscular weakness (including our own self-contempt) comes to us from elsewhere. Thus, Beauvoir insists, "for mankind not even the body itself is pure nature."³⁶

But if, paradoxically, there are ways that old age comes to us from "without" from "within" our own bodies, in an equally paradoxical manner, it comes to us from our own life-activity: for our past actions continue to bear on our present, and as our past extends and our future is truncated, their weight grows ever greater. All action creates its own inertia: past ac-

tivity congeals in ways that mold present and future action. Beauvoir (following Sartre here) now calls these congealings forms of the "practico-inert." In old age, the inertia of our own past actions presses ever more heavily on us. Future possibilities become increasingly delimited by how we have already acted over a lifetime. "From the past I carry all the mechanisms of my body, the cultural tools I use, my knowledge and my ignorances, my relationship with others, my activities and my obligations. Everything that I have ever done has been taken back by the past and it has there become reified under the form of the practico-inert. . . . By his praxis every man achieves his objectification in the world and becomes possessed by it" (372–73; TA). Thus, for example, the scientist rarely publishes highly original work when he is old because he has already built up "his being outside himself" (*son être hors de lui*) through his previous work, and this in turn now "possesses" him. His extant work is "an ensemble of inert significations" in which he is presently alienated. He develops what Beauvoir (again using Sartre's term) calls "ideological interests" in continuing along his previous tracks, while habits of mind, earlier laid down, prevent him from thinking in fresh ways (391; TA).³⁷

For the aged, rigid habits of mind and fixed routines often shape daily life. These offer a promise (usually unmet) of protection from a threatening and alien world. But habits also preclude new experiences; "inveterate habits . . . create impossibilities." Possessions may also become particularly important sites of alienation, for "the things that belong to us are as it were solidified habits." Indeed, "my objects are myself" and "since the old person no longer makes himself exist by doing, he wants to *have* in order to be."³⁸ This alienation is particularly strong with regard to money, and the character of the elderly miser may be explained as a "magical" identification of the self with its power. Through his possessions the old miser attempts magically "to assure himself of his identity against those who claim to see him as nothing but an object" (469–70; TA).

Engaging Discrepant Materialisms

But here we have come full circle! In the personage of the old miser, we see exemplified how the individual "existential" crisis of old age is imbued with meaning by the macrolevel structures of society. For it is, as Marx had

pointed out, within our particular socioeconomic formation that money promises to be “an omnipotent being” that may turn our attributes and qualities into their opposites.³⁹ It is within the wider social structures of the practico-inert that our personal habits and prior ways of acting attain their own forms of practical inertia. Even as old age comes to us from “ourselves” — from our own histories and our own bodies — it comes to us also from “elsewhere,” from the material mediations of the practico-inert and the serial social relations in which we cannot but act.

Let us return to Simone de Beauvoir’s opening questions: How far is society at large responsible for the degradations of old age? What is, and is not, “ineluctable” in the condition of the aged?⁴⁰ We can now see why she insists on the dialectical “circularity” of their situation. We can also see why a theoretical approach that focuses on how a multiplicity of materialities constitutes the lived experience of age is necessary. The facticities of the individual body’s decline, the large-scale structures of the practico-inert (including discursive formations), the practico-inert weight of our own past actions, all of these mediate the self to itself in ways that both give rise to alienation and are conducive to oppression. Thus theoretical approaches that reductively privilege one aspect of materiality over others will not be adequate to the tasks of social critique — be they of age, gender, or other forms of oppression.

In Beauvoir’s descriptions of the “circular flow” of elements that give rise to the lived experience of old age, in her appreciation of the brute facticities of the aging body, and in her simultaneous demonstration that old age is socially and discursively constituted, we find exemplified a method that nonreductively attends to diverse genres of materiality, to their confluences, mutual mediations, and interconstitutive effects. The facticities of organic bodies play a greater role in aging than in many other situations of oppression, but Beauvoir’s method has far-reaching potential for critical social theory. Working at once “from the inside out,” through phenomenological approaches that illuminate embodied lived experience, and “from the outside in,” through analyses of how seriality and practico-inert “macro” structures produce alienation and oppression, Beauvoir suggests why we need to move beyond discrepant materialisms — and how we may begin to do so.

Notes

- 1 Some work in this genre is informed by Roy Bhaskar’s “critical realism.” See, for example, Brown, Fleetwood, and Roberts, eds., *Critical Realism and Marxism*. Other works proceed from a feminist perspective, for example, Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After*; and Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*.
- 2 Paradigmatic for this genre of “materialism” are Butler, *Gender Trouble*, and *Bodies That Matter*.
- 3 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*.
- 4 Recent key works in this vein include Sheets-Johnstone, *The Roots of Power*; and Catalano, *Thinking Matter*.
- 5 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 34. In citations from this work, and others, I frequently amend the published English translations. Such changes are indicated in the text with the notation “TA” (translation altered) after the page reference.
- 6 In French the second volume is entitled *L’expérience vécue* — lived experience. Unfortunately it is mistranslated in the English edition as “Woman’s Life Today.”
- 7 See chap. 3 of *The Second Sex*, “The Point of View of Historical Materialism,” 53–60.
- 8 The passage she quotes reads: “The immediate, natural and necessary relation of human being to human being is also the relation of man to woman. . . . From this relationship man’s whole level of development can be assessed. It follows from the character of this relationship how far man has become, and has understood himself as, a species-being, a human being. The relation of man to woman is the most natural relation of human being to human being. It indicates, therefore, how far man’s natural behaviour has become human, and how far his human essence has become a natural essence for him, how far his human nature has become nature for him.” *The Second Sex*, 731–32. I cite the Marx passage from “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” as given in the English translation by Thomas Bottomore, 154.
- 9 Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 124–25.
- 11 “Each vocable brings along with it the profound signification which the whole epoch has given to it. As soon as the ideologist speaks, he says more and something different from what he wants to say; the period steals his thought from him. He constantly veers about, and the idea finally expressed is a profound deviation.” Sartre, *Search for a Method*, 113. This essay, translated and published as a separate volume in English, is the preface to *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. See also Sartre’s response to poststructural discourse theory in “Jean-Paul Sartre répond.”
- 12 Beauvoir, *Old Age*. The U.S. edition is entitled *The Coming of Age* (New York:

- Putnam, 1972). Pagination is the same in the 1972 British and U.S. editions. The book was originally published as *La Vieillesse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).
- 13 There has been much debate about the Beauvoir-Sartre relationship and about who influenced whom, with regards to their earlier works. However, very little has been written about the question of influence in the later works. I am suggesting here that profound mutual influences were at play, but I avoid addressing issues of whether they flowed more in one direction than the other.
 - 14 See Kruks, "Simone de Beauvoir." For a wider survey of the topic, see also Kruks, "Beauvoir's Time/Our Time."
 - 15 Moi, *What Is a Woman?*, vii. This work constitutes a tacit autocritique, I believe, because Moi was one of the first enthusiastically to introduce post-structuralism into Anglo-American feminist theory in the highly influential volume *Sexual/Textual Politics*.
 - 16 Moi, *What Is a Woman?*, 74.
 - 17 The phrase is Sara Heinämaa's in *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference*, 70.
 - 18 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 34.
 - 19 Young, "Lived Body vs. Gender," 19.
 - 20 Young, "Gender as Seriality."
 - 21 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, xxx.
 - 22 Beauvoir's use of the verb *assumer*—to assume, or to take up—is complex. Such legalistic English phrases as "assuming a debt" or "assuming responsibility for somebody" gesture toward her meaning. However, she uses the term to imply the existential taking up and making one's own of the factic "givens" of one's situation. One "assumes" one's sex, for example, insofar as one integrates one's sexual being into one's existence. Such an assumption is not "voluntary" in the sense of being a conscious, rational choice but rather is affirmed in action, through one's projects, through one's embodied being-in-the-world.
 - 23 Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 166.
 - 24 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, xxv.
 - 25 Beauvoir's focus is mainly on France in the 1950s and 1960s; she also offers some discussion of the United States and other parts of Europe, and an appendix on old age in socialist countries. Attitudes toward old age and treatment of the aged today are not greatly different from what they were in the times that Beauvoir describes. Indeed, the emphasis on "youth culture" that began in the 1960s may have made the condition of the aged worse. Basic state pensions are still not at all adequate in either Britain or the United States; and the aged still mostly live isolated or ghettoized as she describes.
 - 26 Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 1; TA.
 - 27 Although some data on old women is provided, and there is a discussion of sexual desire among the elderly of each sex, the main focus of the book is

- explicitly on men. Since, says Beauvoir, men are the workers and are those who are active in public and make history, they suffer the losses of old age far more acutely than women. See especially 89, 217, 261–62. In contrast, Beauvoir suggests that the transition to old age is less difficult for women because they are already in the domestic or private sphere. This argument, made in 1970, is highly problematic because women by this time had much more fully left the domestic sphere than in 1949 and because, as Beauvoir had argued in *The Second Sex*, the decline in sexual attractiveness that accompanies old age presents more of a crisis for women than men, with menopause marking a definitive turning point in the aging process. There is a troubling disjuncture between Beauvoir's treatment of women's aging in *The Second Sex* and her very scant consideration of the specificities of women's aging in *Old Age*.
- 28 The English translation renders this as "Old Age Seen from Without," a formulation that misses Beauvoir's appropriation of the concept of "exteriority" from the *Critique*. Because the English translation of *Old Age* preceded that of the *Critique* by several years, English conventions for translating Sartre's neologisms were not yet in place. I have frequently altered the translation of *Old Age* to make Beauvoir's use of Sartre's terminology more visible.
 - 29 There is also a tacit autobiographical element to "Being-in-the World," as Beauvoir was sixty-two when *Old Age* was published. Anne Strasser explores some of the similarities between Beauvoir's autobiographical account of her own aging and the account offered in *Old Age* in "La vieillesse comme mutilation."
 - 30 Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 10; TA.
 - 31 In the *Critique*, the body is methodologically important as the origin of the basic "organic" need that necessitates praxis. However, it is not explicitly considered as the site of lived experience, be it of either free action or seriality. Indeed, embodied experience is yet more absent in the *Critique* than it was earlier in *Being and Nothingness*!
 - 32 Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 88.
 - 33 "Woman, like man, is her body," Beauvoir had written, referencing Merleau-Ponty. However, she immediately added, "but her body is something other than herself." Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 29. This observation is made as Beauvoir is discussing menstruation, but it is clear from her later remarks that it is the social meaning of menstruation that makes it so alienating for women.
 - 34 Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 86.
 - 35 "One is not born a woman, Simone de Beauvoir correctly insisted. It took the political-epistemological terrain of postmodernism to be able to insist on a co-text to de Beauvoir's: one is not born an organism. Organisms are made; they are constructs of a world-changing kind. The constructions of an organism's boundaries . . . are the job of discourses." Haraway, "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies," 207.
 - 36 Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 12; TA.

- 37 "Interest is being-wholly-outside-oneself-in-a-thing in so far as it conditions *praxis* as a categorical imperative." Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 197.
- 38 Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 469–70; TA.
- 39 "The power to confuse and invert all human and natural qualities, to bring about fraternization of incompatibles, the *divine* power of money, resides in its *character* as the alienated and self-alienating species life of man. . . . What I as a *man* am unable to do, and thus what all my individual faculties are unable to do, is made possible for me by money." Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 192.
- 40 Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 10; TA.

Jason Edwards

The Materialism of Historical Materialism

There are innumerable and seemingly interminable interpretations and debates concerning what constitutes the materialism of historical materialism. Most of these are only of interest if one buys into the premise that social and political analysis must proceed from a given ontology. Now, this is not to say that work on an ontology of human social life is not of interest or value. Part of what such an ontology has to deal with is the notion of "materialism" as a philosophical doctrine that concerns the nature and multiform manifestations of matter. But I would argue that such considerations of matter and the doctrine of materialism have — or should have — little to do with historical materialism as an approach to social and political analysis. Attempts to import into Marxism philosophical conceptions of materialism, whether in the form of classical Enlightenment materialism, biological naturalism or, in more recent times, critical realism,¹ have historically proven wanting for those who continue to see historical materialism as a theory of the social and political institutions, practices, and trajectories of contemporary capitalist societies.

It does not follow that historical materialism should be considered as a set of standard axioms that are picked up by the social or political theorist and mechanically applied. The materialism of historical materialism should be

seen as more of a heuristic for social and political study rather than a set of explanatory theses. Yet the power of this heuristic seems to have been overlooked by many of the very people who did such service to social theory by dismantling the notion of historical materialism as a positivist science based on metaphysical conceptions of history and the subject. Nebulous as it is, we might identify poststructuralism as cohering around the decentering of the subject and the rejection of historical teleology. Poststructuralism, in this respect, posed a powerful and ongoing challenge to a Marxism founded on the combination of a humanist philosophical anthropology and some form of economic or technological determinism. There are still, of course, people who wish to defend historical materialism as a theory of human nature and of the successive development of modes of production. But I will assume for the purposes of this essay that such an understanding of historical materialism is not defensible and that if the latter is still to be defended, it is by adopting some conception of theoretical antihumanism and antihistoricism. What then remains at the heart of historical materialism is an ongoing analysis of the current social and political conditions of contemporary capitalist societies in light of their historical development, their embedded institutions and practices, and the contingent circumstances that serve to reproduce them — or that threaten their reproduction — over time.

Now, there is nothing “new” in this understanding of historical materialism. But many poststructuralist critics of humanist and determinist Marxism forget this conception of historical materialism precisely at the moment when they need to remember it. Much of the political analysis that appears in poststructuralist literature effectively resorts to a form of liberal multicultural and identity politics that seems blind or indifferent to the major problems faced by all humans today: climate change, global inequality, forced migration and new forms of slavery, and the proliferation of military technology and warfare. I argue in this essay that we will need to remember the materialism of historical materialism in the requisite sense if we are to understand how these problems are the systemic product of the reproduction of modern capitalist societies and the international system of states. The life of social production and consumption continues to be the central feature of human societies and in the absence of either natural or mechanically created super-abundance, it will continue to be so. Struggles for land and resources as global warming continues apace,

economic competition between states and the continued inequality between North and South, the “War on Terror” and the modern revolution in military affairs, all have obvious and far-reaching consequences in the present for how material life is organized, disrupted, and transformed. We need to return, then, to a kind of historical materialism that focuses on the reproduction of capitalist societies and the system of states, both in everyday practices of production and consumption and in the ideological and coercive power of states and the international system.

In this essay I elaborate on the features of such a historical materialism in three sections. First, I explore the notion of material practices in Marxism. Here I argue that material practices should not be understood as limited to activities involved in the immediate process of production but must be more broadly conceived as all those practices involving material bodies — organic and nonorganic — that, from the point of view of historical materialism, can be seen as a totality of practices that reproduce the relations of production over time. The second section focuses on the importance of the material practices of everyday life and the organization of lived space for the reproduction of capitalism, which is undertaken primarily through an engagement with the work of Henri Lefebvre. In the final section, I argue that it remains crucial for a credible historical materialism that it should involve a political theory of the way everyday life and space are mediated by the state and the international system in sustaining — and providing challenges to — the currently constituted social and economic order. In this regard, the kind of ontological materialist approach developed in the most prominent work of Marxist theory in recent times, namely Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*, falls short. Nonetheless, there are important Marxian analyses that can illuminate this relationship between the material practices of everyday life and lived space on the one hand and the global organization of economic and political power on the other.

Marxism and Material Practices

In *Capital*, Marx explored the conditions necessary for the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. The abstract conceptual analysis of the commodity, capital, production and circulation, surplus-value, and so on, set out in part I of the first volume, gives way to a survey of the laws,

institutions, and practices that are necessary for the extraction of surplus-value to take place in the process of production. The famous chapter on "The Working Day" charts the various quotidian procedures, routines, and prohibitions that workers in different industries were subjected to in mid-nineteenth-century England, whether it be children working in cotton mills, steel foundries, bread bakers, or dress makers.² What is clear from this analysis is the complex nature of the relations that are required to reproduce the capitalist system of production. In these pages, Marx's approach departs from the programmatic and deterministic summary of historical materialism provided in his preface of 1859.³ Rather, it is in these more open-ended analyses that we grasp the sense of the materialism in Marx's historical materialism; that is, the totality of the material practices that are required to reproduce the relations of production over time. The character of these practices in any given setting is not easily or neatly drawn out on a conceptual tableau in which the economic has primacy and is a straightforward synonym of the material. The material relations of production are those that are instantiated in specific kinds of practices that in any given setting appear as having various characteristics: legal, political, economic, ideological, and so on. While Marx locates the immediate space of production as central to the modern system of industrial capitalism, historical materialism—understood as a broad analysis of diverse social formations—recognizes the diversity of the forms of practice that are necessary for sustaining the relations of production in very different kinds of societies. This kind of materialist analysis draws our attention to the way in which specific social institutions and relations, whether historical or contemporary, are instantiated in multiple forms of material practices.

Accordingly, it is important to recognize that material practices should not be conceived of simply as those involved in the immediate process of production. It has been argued that Marx's historical materialism maintains a distinction between the material and the social properties of human activity, where material activities are considered to be those that involve the use of productive forces in the immediate process of production and social activities are those that do not.⁴ But the problem with this claim is twofold. First, an object does not become a material productive force unless it is selected for use in production by human beings within a social context. Material objects, in this sense, are always socially mediated. Second, a given "material" object—in the sense that it is physical and tangible

— at any given time may be employed in the immediate process of production, in the immediate support of production, or in a way that has little to do with the immediate process of production at all. A gun, for example, is a productive force when it is used to shoot rabbits that are to be consumed; it is not a productive force, although it can be a condition for the immediate process of production, when it is used to coerce or protect the immediate producers; and it has little to do with the immediate process of production when it is used in sport, although here it might support the kind of ideological practice that sustains social order. All such activities concerning human use of guns constitute material practices in the sense that they involve human bodies actively engaging with and transforming the material world and in that they are, at the same time, social activities.

We cannot understand the reproduction of capitalist relations of production in the present except as an expression of manifold and various material practices. I will turn presently to this conception of practice, or material practice, in more detail, but what should be recognized here is that historical materialism is not inconsistent with an approach that emphasizes the significance of nonproductive practices, or at least of practices that are not directly involved in the productive process. It is not fatal to historical materialism that the immediate space of production plays a lesser role in the reproduction of the relations of production than it might have done in the heyday of mass industrial capitalism. Various attempts have been made over the last thirty years or so to establish that transformations in the character of production and consumption have rendered historical materialism obsolete. But this is the case only on the basis of two erroneous assumptions: first, that class analysis—and in particular a certain kind of class analysis in which the existence of a Fordist industrial working class is seen in itself as a necessary condition of capitalist relations of production—lies at the heart of historical materialism and second, that unquestioned primacy is granted in the reproduction of the relations of production to material practices in the immediate sphere of production. Neither assumption operates in the more illuminating texts written by Marx nor in those of authors in the Western Marxist tradition such as Gramsci, Adorno, and Althusser.

It was Althusser who, in rejecting the notion of the Hegelian expressive totality, most prominently made the case for a Marxism in which "from the first moment to the last, the lonely instance of the 'last hour' never comes."⁵

In other words, jettisoning the idea of the expressive totality, which Althusser identified in the work of Hegelian Marxists such as Lukács, involves a recognition of the complex nature of any given social formation. Its various “levels,” “moments” or — the expression that Althusser employs most fruitfully, “practices” — appear as relatively autonomous, occupying distinct spaces as well as times. In this respect, different practices have different locations and histories that will determine their relationship. While there is a good deal to be critical of in Althusser’s conception of historical materialism — including his assertion of a structure in dominance as well as his attempt to provide a criterion of scientificity for historical materialism in the shape of the theory of theoretical practice⁶ — we should not be too hasty in dismissing this notion of a complex totality. The concept of “totality” has exercised poststructuralist thinkers, particularly with respect to deconstruction, where the notion of totality in the human sciences was for a long time associated with the structuralist attempt to discern a structural center. This latter strategy was brilliantly exposed and opposed by Jacques Derrida in the 1960s.⁷ And indeed, it was the case that in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital*, Althusser and his collaborators were searching for the key to unlock the totality, something they believed was to be provided by resorting to the epistemological fiat of the theory of theoretical practice. But on the other hand, it is perfectly coherent to speak of a totality without a center, as in effect Althusser was doing despite his (largely rhetorical) nod to the notions of structure in dominance and determination by the economic in the last instance. What deconstructionism points out is that the meaning of the totality is never closed off by its constitutive elements: in Derrida’s approach to the reading of texts, meaning is constantly deferred. This is not the place to enter into a discussion of whether texts and societies can both be treated in this deconstructionist fashion, but it is timely to point out that rejecting the idea of a centered totality, as an abstraction of the character of social relations, does not entail a rejection of the notion of a totality of social relations without a center. Indeed, as I show in the final section, this is how more recent Marxian contributions approach the question of totality with respect to the character of the international economic and political system.

A conception of a complex totality of material practices that are constitutive of capitalist relations of production is, then, salvageable out of the work of Marx and Althusser. Material practices, in this regard, should

be seen as regular forms of behavior that are norm-governed, and that involve one’s relation to one’s body and to other bodies, as well as to objects of experience. If we designate such practices “political,” “ideological,” or “economic,” then we do so only insofar as such practices attend to what we generally understand as political, ideological, or economic phenomena: the government of social conflict and cooperation, the production and propagation of systems of belief, and processes of production and consumption. If we talk, however, of a totality of these practices that are constitutive of capitalist relations of production, there is a sense in which this is merely a work of description. As long as we define capitalist relations of production as those in which there are private property rights, legally protected exchange through markets, and a market for labor, then we may talk of the sum of material practices that are required for such relations of production to be reproduced. But it should be clear that we have to go beyond this if we are to demonstrate how this complex totality is instantiated in the everyday life of people and how the material practices of everyday life are implicated in the political and economic power of the state and the international system.

Everyday Life, Space, and Capitalism

So far we have seen how Marx set out in *Capital* to analyze the everyday conditions of production that were necessary for the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. Indeed, Marx was not the first to do this: before he turned to political economy, Engels had already performed this kind of investigation, and there are also earlier passages where the Scottish theorists of commercial society, particularly Adam Smith in his discussion of the division of labor, were doing something similar.⁸ Until around the 1920s, when considerations of everyday life did take place, they were undertaken from a primarily Marxian perspective that recognized the space of work as crucial for the analysis. The life of the industrial worker was subject to the rigid and repetitive experience of producing uniform commodities in a system of mass production. Such considerations tended to see the experiences of the worker as relatively passive responses to the quotidian demands of the workplace. Combined with ideological justifications for capitalism, this presented a picture of everyday life as overwhelmingly negative and repressive. As a consequence it was believed that escape

from the exploitation and oppression of work under capitalism could be achieved only through revolution, whether that was to come about through the spontaneous development of working-class political consciousness or through the actions of the revolutionary vanguard party.

Accordingly, the analysis of everyday experience from the “classical” Marxist perspective tended to view such experience, structured as it was primarily by the organization of the sphere of production, as a functional consequence of the reproduction of the relations of industrial and financial capitalism. In this regard, the constitution of experience through the manifold forms of material practice outside the immediate space of production, which each individual engages with on a daily basis, was overlooked. The growth in the twentieth century of a sociology that was concerned with exactly such experiences, as expressed in somatic and linguistic conventions and rituals involved in the conduct of everyday life, thus posed a challenge to the kind of Marxism that limited significant experience to the immediate site of production.⁹ Subsequently, the Foucauldian analysis of power relations in modern societies would emphasize how the experience of workers in the sphere of production was shaped by the same kind of disciplinary norms that applied to a large variety of institutions and material practices outside the immediate production process.¹⁰ In the Marxist tradition, the lessons of a sociology that focused on the sphere of material culture as a mechanism for the reproduction of capitalism were first taken up by Walter Benjamin and members of the Frankfurt School, most prominently Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.¹¹ To some extent the latter two anticipated the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish*, especially in their account of how normalizing pacification operates in those areas of modern everyday life that are conceived by liberalism as the domain of the private individual freed from the encroachment of power.

Perhaps the most influential account of how capitalism is reproduced in social spaces outside of the immediate sphere of production was, however, that provided by Henri Lefebvre in his work on everyday life. When Lefebvre published the first volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life* in 1947, the notion of *la vie quotidienne* was intended to convey a meaning that, as Stuart Eldon points out, is not quite captured by the English term “everyday life.”¹² The notion of the quotidian, in this respect, is meant to convey the importance of ordinary everyday experience in modernity. Furthermore, it explains how such experience has become uniform, routine, and

repetitive. In this regard everyday life outside the immediate space of production has the same kind of routine and repetitive character as in the Taylorist work process. Yet at the same time, the everyday life of consumption and leisure had by the late twentieth century taken on greater significance in the industrial capitalist West, with family and private life absorbing more of the individual’s time as working hours declined and leisure time increased, as the production of consumer goods multiplied and diversified, and as an ideology of personal freedom and self-improvement became pervasive. Consumption and leisure now came to be seen as life’s goal and work as a necessary means toward that end. In this respect the everyday life of work and the everyday life of consumption came to be widely regarded as two separate forms of experience, the first usually seen as a necessary bind and the second as the domain of freedom and self-improvement. Lefebvre argues throughout his work that this separation is nonetheless merely apparent, for

daily life, like language, contains manifest forms and deep structures that are implicit in its operations yet concealed in and through them. . . . Everyday acts are repeated. . . . They are simultaneously individual, “group,” . . . and social. In ways that are poorly understood, the everyday is thus closely related to the modes of organization and existence of a (particular) society, which imposes relations between forms of work, leisure, “private life,” transport, public life. A constraining influence, the everyday imposes itself on all members of the relevant society, who, with some exceptions, have only minor variations on the norms at their disposal.¹³

What Lefebvre points to is the importance of considering the everyday life of consumption and leisure as it features in the totality of material practices — including those of production — that are involved in the reproduction of economic and political life. In this regard we might see practices of individual freedom and self-improvement as effects of social relations that constitute the conditions for the reproduction of capitalist relations of production in the context of the power of the state and the international system.

Lefebvre’s emphasis on the importance of everyday life outside the immediate sphere of production is the spur for his extensive analysis of the way in which the production of space in the modern world is tied to the

experience of the quotidian.¹⁴ Lefebvre's focus on the manner in which material space is produced in diverse times and places — but particularly in the modern city — marks an important turn in social theory away from the valorization of the historical event or process to a deeper reflection on the manner in which the organization of the material spaces in which human beings live and work both constrain them and provide resources for social action. The analysis of space in this fashion has been continued by contemporary sociologists and geographers interested in the connections between urban space, capitalist production, the state, and the international system.¹⁵ I touch on some of the contributions to this literature in the final section, but here it suffices to note the indebtedness of this more recent work to Lefebvre's conceptualization of space. Space, in this sense, does not denote an empty void or the given physical environment in which human beings live. Space is rather the social space produced by the material practices of human beings. For Lefebvre, the analysis of the social production of space rests on three related concepts. First, the concept of spatial practices: that is, the general practice of the organization of space in a particular social setting, given a society's productive technology, its relations of production, its religious beliefs, cultural conventions, and so on. The spatial practice of the ancient city-state, for example, is very different to that of the medieval or modern city. Second, representations of space: that is, space as it is technically conceptualized in the knowledge and practices of scientists, architects, planners, and so on. Again, the form of these representations will vary in different kinds of social formation. Third, representational spaces: the lived space that people experience in their daily lives, a space that in the main is "passively experienced" and that "tend[s] towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs."¹⁶

Lefebvre's work on the experience of everyday life and the production of space through manifold and interdependent material and representational practices is crucial for the operation of a meaningful historical materialism today. While some Marxists have attempted to revive Marxism by searching for new philosophical criteria for its scientific standing, reducing it thereby to a set of discrete explanatory hypotheses, or by transforming it into a purely normative theory of distributive justice, Lefebvre's emphasis on everyday life and space provides for a perspective from which the central problem of historical materialism — how the relations of produc-

tion sustain and reproduce certain historically determinate forms of production and consumption — can be best explored. Historical materialism in this guise is not a metatheory of the successive development of modes of production but rather points us toward that dense but open totality of material practices that constitute and reproduce a given social formation.

This is not to deny that aspects of Lefebvre's historical materialism are deeply problematic. It is no exaggeration to say that his intellectual nemesis was Althusser. Lefebvre's central objection to the kind of "structural" Marxism that Althusser and his collaborators developed was that it subordinates the individual — or subject — to the structure, such that subjects appear as little more than bearers of social structure. Lefebvre's rejection of this kind of straightforward subordination of subjects to social structure is important to his argument insofar as subjective experience is a central category for understanding the character of everyday life. In some of his work, he accordingly attempted to steer a course between the two major philosophical currents that dominated the postwar French intellectual scene: structuralism and phenomenology. Much of his analysis here sought to demonstrate how the norms and representations of everyday life operate within the experience of individuals.¹⁷ At the same time, however, Lefebvre maintained that "alienation" is "the central notion of philosophy."¹⁸ Despite his explicit rejection of the presumption that a concept of alienation depends on a philosophical anthropology which posits a substantive, presocial human nature, his constant return to the notion is problematic. For it underpins an analysis of everyday life and the contemporary organization of space that is largely negative in character. The implication is that individuals are alienated in the combined processes of production and everyday life and that alienation can be overcome only through their transformation. What such a view still presupposes is a utopian view of nonalienating forms of production and cultural life against which current forms are measured. It simultaneously gives rise to the politically recondite idea that changes to production and everyday life must be brought about from the outside, by external acts of transgression and rejection. This explains the attraction of Lefebvre's work for the situationist revolutionaries.¹⁹

So far I have endorsed the idea that a materialist analysis of the organization of everyday life and space in capitalist societies can and should proceed on the basis of an understanding of the totality of material prac-

tices that are necessary for the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. But it must avoid the reductionist trap of thinking either that the practices of everyday life and the structuring of space are all functionally beneficial for the reproduction of capitalism or that individual experiences of everyday life and space are uniform (or simply passive) in character. To do so would be to paint the kind of unremittingly bleak view of modernity set out in Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. What such a picture fails to recognize is that the material practices constitutive of modern life are the only grounds from which we could hope and expect to bring about important political and social transformations. Indeed, in his last published book, *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre himself pursues this point through a reflection on the rhythms of everyday life, particularly in the context of urban space. "Rhythm," in this respect, denotes the repetitive character of everyday life, but there can be "no identical absolute repetition indefinitely: Whence the relation between repetition and difference. When it concerns the everyday, rites, ceremonies, fetes, rules and laws, there is always something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive: difference."²⁰ Accordingly, even within contemporary urban practices that appear highly repetitive in character — whether that be travelling into work by the same route every day, going to the same kind of bars, restaurants, or clubs with friends, surfing the internet to expand one's network of contacts, or playing video games that involve some kind of virtual interaction with the space of urban life — there is difference and the potential for such practices to become sites of political resistance and transformation. While historical materialism has traditionally tended to ignore these last kinds of practice, their analysis is central both for understanding the reproduction of capitalist societies over time and for considering how social relations may be transformed. However, important as such an approach toward everyday life and the organization of lived space may be, it must be connected to an analysis of the relationship between economic production, the state, and the international system.

A Materialist Geopolitics

The last decade has seen a remarkable (at least from the perspective of the early 1990s) revival of Marxian analyses of the international economic and political system. Perhaps the most prominent of these is Michael Hardt's

and Antonio Negri's work on *Empire*.²¹ Hardt's and Negri's thesis concerning the decline of the nation-state and a new form of sovereignty based on a "network power" of dominant states, supranational organizations, and capitalist corporations — or *Empire* — is by now well known. But as substantively problematic as this thesis is, what is most striking about the work is the extent to which it turns on the concepts of biopolitics and deterritorialization, as these are taken from the work of Foucault and of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, respectively.²² Clearly, both of these concepts are materialist in the sense that they are concerned, in the first instance, with the governing of human bodies and populations, and in the second, with the organization of physical space. But in fact what *Empire* presents to us is not, as one might expect, an uncovering of how biopolitics and the process of deterritorialization work through and transform everyday life and the ordering of lived space but rather a highly conceptual and abstract argument that starts off from the assumption of these concepts and then derives *Empire* from them.

Influential as Hardt's and Negri's work has been, then, it is difficult to see in what sense it counts as a materialist analysis other than that it points toward the general importance of the organization of bodies and space for the operation of political and economic power in the contemporary world. Their argument provides little in the way of analysis of the specific kinds of material practices — whether they be economic, cultural, or political — that sustain international capitalism. It is only when one turns to Hardt's and Negri's second book that the clear motivation behind the first can be seen. For here we see a developed account of the potential alternative to *Empire* in the world today: the "multitude," a body that while remaining "multiple and internally different, is able to act in common and thus rule itself" and that is "*living flesh* that rules itself"; "the multitude is the only social subject capable of realizing democracy, that is the rule of everyone by everyone."²³ The lens through which Hardt and Negri view this multitude is one that is shaped by their engagement with Spinoza as the author of a philosophy of absolute freedom, and it is this "faculty for freedom and the propensity to refuse authority [that] have become the most healthy and most noble human instincts, the real signs of eternity." This conception of freedom gives shape to an "ontological" multitude, without which "we could not conceive our social being."²⁴

For all intents and purposes then, *Empire* and *Multitude* are books built

less on the analysis of material practices and more on the attempt to provide an ontological foundation, on a certain reading of Spinoza, for contemporary Marxism.²⁵ In effect, Hardt and Negri are interested in the revival of a philosophical discourse of materialism that seeks to find unity in the multiplicity of “singularities” that characterize a world they take to have been increasingly rendered fluid and “networked” through the process of economic globalization and the emergence of Empire. But what this analysis skips over is the deeply contestable nature of the processes that they claim to have shaped the world of postmodern imperialism and the multitude. “Globalization” refers to any number of processes whose precise character and consequences vary quite widely. At the very least, the notion of the death of the sovereign state is much overhyped. While the growing internationalization of the economy may have given more leverage to supranational organizations and multinational corporations over the course of the past twenty years, it remains the case that such institutions continue to be highly dependent on the ability of the sovereign state to police populations and borders, provide for internal security and economic regulation, and, where necessary, use military power to eliminate real and perceived threats to international markets and order. Political power and economic production continue to be organized within distinct territories — principally the nation and the region — and to be governed by hierarchies whose authority is derived from the legally recognized sovereign state.

Fortunately, Hardt’s and Negri’s approach does not exhaust the possibilities for a historical materialist analysis of capitalism in the context of the modern state and international system today. Other authors have attempted to chart the links between the material practices involved in everyday life and the experience of space, and the wider organization of economic and political power. Geographers concerned with how neoliberalism has restructured the form of capital accumulation have charted the way in which, for example, policies of structural adjustment have affected the character of urban growth in recent times. As Mike Davis claims, neoliberalism in Latin America, Asia, and Africa has had the effect of creating megacities that are significantly composed of slum dwellings. The conditions imposed on countries for IMF loans from the late 1970s, including trade liberalization and a reduction in deficit spending, destroyed the livelihood of many small rural producers, forcing them into

cities alongside the most marginal of the urban population who were the principal victims of reduction in state expenditure on public services. Responses to living in the slums of the megacities, however, vary and are dependent on contingent circumstances: “Even within a single city, slum populations can support a bewildering variety of responses to structural neglect and deprivation, ranging from charismatic churches and prophetic cults to ethnic militias, street gangs, neoliberal NGOs, and revolutionary social movements.”²⁶

David Harvey has also charted the effects on urban life of the neoliberal policies pursued by the major states and international economic organizations since the 1980s. In contrast to “Third World” cities, many of the large metropolitan centers in the rich West, starting with New York, underwent a transformation from the late 1970s onward that represents a reclaiming of urban space by an economic and cultural elite.²⁷ In Harvey’s account, neoliberalism largely appears as a tool of a financial elite that wished to reestablish its political, economic, and cultural preeminence after decades of retreat in the face of social democratic reforms that had reduced inequalities in the distribution of wealth. Accordingly, there is a strong element of class analysis in this argument. But in the sense that class remains important in historical materialist analysis, it cannot be conceived of purely in the sense of an abstract relation to the means of production. The notion of a “class in itself” has to be jettisoned, for a social class is always a form of collective identity that can be realized only through shared practices and experiences. In this regard, the view that the “multitude” could ever be an agent of social and political transformation is a fantasy. What binds a group together as a “class,” and thus provides it with the capacity for transformative agency, is a set of material practices involved in everyday life and the experience of lived space. It is at least feasible, in this respect, to talk of a revival of a “capitalist class” in recent times, if by that is meant a group of people who work in large financial and business corporations in metropolitan centers such as New York, London, Frankfurt, and Tokyo, have clear links to policy makers, are advocates of neoliberal ideology, and have materially benefited from neoliberal reforms.

The promotion of neoliberal economic policies by the major states and supranational financial organizations is only one feature of the way in which the geopolitical system has transformed the character of everyday life and lived space in recent times. Any developed analysis should of

course also focus on other features of this system today, not least the effects of the revolution in military affairs, the Bush doctrine, and the War on Terror. An approach that looks at the broad character of geopolitical organization and processes is necessary if we are to understand the character of everyday life and the structuring of space in the contemporary world and these serve to reproduce and provide challenges to capitalist societies. To be sure, there are a significant number of scholars working in the areas of the international political and economic system and the production and reproduction of space and everyday life who adopt such an approach, some of whom explicitly acknowledge an affiliation to Marxism while others are more critically distant. There remains an important sense in which this approach is a totalizing one, seeking to link up seemingly contingent and local phenomena with large-scale social and political transformations. But in their critique of the notion of “totality” as a hierarchy, many poststructuralist and postmodernist authors arguably moved far too quickly to a model of the world as networked and flowing.²⁸ For most people, everyday life continues to be experienced in the shape of interactions with a hierarchical ordering of material practices in a given, lived space that is governed by the state and the geopolitical system.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to address the question of what does or should constitute the materialism of historical materialism. This is an important question since the powerful criticisms made by poststructuralism of the concepts of the subject and of historical teleology provided an unanswerable challenge to the humanist and historicist Marxism that tended also toward economic determinism. But if we consider historical materialism rather as a theory of the totality of material practices implicated in the reproduction of contemporary capitalist societies, then I would argue that it is not only possible but entirely necessary to save this theory. Poststructuralist and postmodernist attempts to understand the character of the contemporary geopolitical and international economic system have largely resulted in an unrealistic privileging of global networks and flows. Work by influential globalization theorists such as Manuel Castells and Anthony Giddens²⁹ has effectively resulted in a politics of personal life and self-improvement that often seems blind or indifferent

to the structures that constrain peoples' lives. But even authors who are critical of the tendencies of globalization, such as Hardt and Negri, often end up embracing idealist solutions — such as the ontological myth of the multitude — that simply fail to grasp the character of contemporary capitalist societies and the system of states. It is only a historical materialism that concentrates on the multiplicity of material practices in their particular historical and spatial dimensions — by focusing on the character of everyday life and lived space (as set out by Lefebvre) and by attending to its relationship to the ordering of the city, region, state, and international system (as in the recent work of critical geographers and social theorists) — that can aid us in a realistic assessment of solutions to the major problems of climate change, global inequality, and warfare that face the world today.

Notes

- 1 See Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*; Kolakowski, vol. 2 of *Main Currents of Marxism*, chap. 17; Timpanaro, *On Materialism*; Brown, Fleetwood, and Roberts, eds., *Critical Realism and Marxism*.
- 2 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).
- 3 Marx, preface to *An Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*.
- 4 Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*.
- 5 Althusser, *For Marx*, 113; Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, part 2, chap. 4.
- 6 See Hindess and Hirst, *Mode of Production and Social Formation*; Glucksmann, “A Ventriloquist Structuralism.”
- 7 Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences.”
- 8 Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*; Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, books 1–3.
- 9 Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*; Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.
- 10 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.
- 11 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*; Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; Adorno, *The Culture Industry*.
- 12 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1; Eldon, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre*, 112.
- 13 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 3, 4–5.
- 14 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.
- 15 See for example: Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*; Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*; Davis, *Planet of Slums*; Massey, *For Space*; Hirst, *Space and Power*.

- 16 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 31–38, 39.
- 17 Eldon, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre*, 113.
- 18 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, 168.
- 19 See Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*; Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.
- 20 Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, 6.
- 21 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.
- 22 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London, 1988).
- 23 Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 100.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 221.
- 25 See Negri, *Subversive Spinoza*.
- 26 Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 201–2.
- 27 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 44–48.
- 28 Castells, *The Informational City*.
- 29 Giddens, *Runaway World*.

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