
Books Forum Introduction

The newest materialisms

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In 2010, Coole and Frost's landmark volume *New Materialisms* gave voice to a growing dissatisfaction with the constructionism dominating social analysis and bundled quite diverse theoretical projects, ranging from an ontological reorientation toward the natural sciences to posthumanist bioethics and a re-engagement with political economy, under the banner of a rejuvenated materialism. Five years later, this Books Forum examines some of the ramifications of this overhauled materialism for how we understand the life sciences in contemporary societies.

But how new is the new materialism, really? Thomas Lemke compares Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin's booklet *New Materialism* to James Kern Feibleman's book of the same title, which appeared more than four decades earlier (and was reprinted in softcover edition in 2013). Although dating from an era when physics rather than the life sciences served as the main point of reference in philosophical reflections on the natural sciences, Feibleman's rearticulation of materialism resembles its current versions in that it challenges explanations of the human that disregard the material world. However, each new materialism defines itself in opposition to the idealism of its time. In the case of the latest materialisms this idealism takes the form of social constructionism and post-structuralism. Dolphijn and van der Tuin's polemics against these intellectual movements ignore the political and theoretical problems they responded to, Lemke maintains.

Elizabeth Wilson's *Gut Feminism* represents the long-standing engagement of feminist thinkers with

the corporeal condition of human life. In her review, Vicki Kirby praises the book for not following the vulgar trajectory of the new materialism, which purports that a return to real politics has supplanted idle questions of representation. Instead Wilson examines how the digestive system responds to mental processes and discourses. However, Kirby points to an oxymoronic quality of this project: while Wilson acknowledges that the political success of feminism has rested on denaturalizing and debiologizing the respective roles of men and women in society, she seeks to advance this emancipatory project by bringing biology, although conceptualized as inherently cultural, back into the political discussion.

Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby's *Clinical Labor* conceptualizes participation in clinical trials, tissue donations and gestational surrogacy as new forms of labor in a post-Fordist bioeconomy. Samantha Frost's review shows how their analytic framework opens the nineteenth-century historical materialism of Marx's labor theory of value to the new materialist concern with the agency of biological matter. This agency takes the form of the generative energy of the worker's biology, which continues to produce surplus value even after the separation of biological materials from her body. This feature of clinical labor escapes the Marxist notion of alienated labor, which assumes that the living labor of the production process is congealed as dead labor in the exchangeable commodity. Frost is troubled by the understanding of personhood underlying this conceptual extension of the laboring self into extracted tissues.

Despite the controversies within contemporary materialism, which come to the fore in the reviews collected in this Books Forum, it seems as if a label that once served as a pejorative has become an umbrella under which scholars of very different intellectual orientations currently mingle.

Reference

Coole, D. and Frost, N. (2010) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham, NJ: Duke University Press.

Nicolas Langlitz is Associate Professor at The New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of *Neuropsychedelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain* and currently studies the epistemic culture of neurophilosophy and the culture controversy in primatology.