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Political Ontologies: Cultural Studies and the Nonhuman Turn

Over the past decade, since it was first proposed as the title of a conference held at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee in 2012, the phrase ‘nonhuman turn’ has gained currency as an umbrella term for theoretical formations as diverse as actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology, the various manifestations of speculative realism and varieties of new materialism, affect theory, critical animal and plant studies, or new media theory (cf., e.g., Grusin 2015b; Roffe and Stark 2015; Zylinska 2017; Thakur and Dickstein 2018; Caracciolo, Marcussen and Rodriguez 2022; Lettow and Nessel 2022). Though all of these should certainly not be conflated, what they arguably have in common is their profound challenge to human exceptionalism. As Richard Grusin explains:

Intended as a macroscopic concept, the nonhuman turn is meant to account for the simultaneous or overlapping emergence of a number of different theoretical or critical “turns” – for example, the ontological, network, neurological, affective, digital, ecological, or evolutionary. As something of a theoretical or methodological assemblage, the nonhuman turn tries to make sense of what holds these various other “turns” together, even while allowing for their divergent theoretical and methodological commitments and contradictions. Each of these different elements of the nonhuman turn derives from theoretical movements that argue (in one way or another) against human exceptionalism, expressed most often in the form of conceptual or rhetorical dualisms that separate the human from the nonhuman – variously conceived as animals, plants, organisms, climatic systems, technologies, or ecosystems. (2015a: x)

Arguably, many of the approaches associated with the nonhuman turn have a particular relevance for thinking in and about the Anthropocene or Capitalocene, in which issues of the interrelation and entanglement of the human and the nonhuman have acquired a heightened urgency everywhere.¹ How do these important theoretical developments affect cultural studies as an intellectual and political practice? And how does cultural studies relate to them in turn? More

¹ Though there is no room here to go into these important debates, I would point out that none of these terms – human, nonhuman, Anthropocene (which also inscribes the figure of the universal *Anthropos*) – should be used uncritically, but that they need to be problematized or deconstructed, contextualized or ‘provincialized’ (as Chakrabarty [2000] might say), and thus divested of their homogenizing and universalizing power.

specifically, where are possible points of interconnection or cross-fertilization? What novel questions or fields of investigation and intervention can be opened up for cultural studies? How do the respective genealogies of cultural studies and the approaches associated with the nonhuman turn relate to one another; what parallels, affinities or entanglements can be identified? What are sources of friction, contradiction or antagonism? After all, like everything else, the nonhuman turn is a contested one. For instance, while most commentators agree that the Anthropocene requires a rethinking of many of the central categories in which the relationship between humanity and the environment has previously been thought, the nature and the extent of this reconceptualization are far from undisputed, and authors such as Kate Soper, Alf Hornborg or Andreas Malm – many of them arguing from a Marxist perspective – have rather fiercely attacked posthumanist theorizing and expressed their skepticism or outright refusal regarding these new approaches, especially their often flattened, relational and processual ontologies – as Malm, for one, puts it: “[l]ess of Latour, more of Lenin” (2020: 118).

I, for one, believe that these theoretical movements have a lot to offer to cultural studies and that their novel ways of addressing issues of matter, objects, affects, the real, etc., especially the way they tend to interlink questions of epistemology, ontology, politics and ethics, have the potential to significantly enrich our discipline – something that is, of course, already happening. While the literature on the new materialisms, speculative realisms, etc. is often dominated by either blanket, categorical rejection (as we’ve seen with Malm) or by an uncritical euphoric hype, it seems more productive to opt for a position lying between or, better, beyond these extremes. It is not a question of cultural studies *becoming*, say, new materialist, or necessarily of adopting wholesale a different ontology – rather, I would want to reactivate the syncretism that has long been a characteristic of cultural studies, to emphasize its long-standing role as a theoretical *bricoleur*, and propose what is essentially a pragmatic, even slightly opportunistic, approach.

Bricolage, as the concept emerges from the work of Lévi-Strauss, has been defined as a “‘science of the concrete’” whose “‘improvised’ or ‘made up’ (these are rough translations of the process of *bricoler*)” structures are “ad hoc responses to an environment” (Hawkes 2003: 36). Theoretical *bricolage*, then, means the production of “implicitly coherent, though explicitly bewildering, systems of connection between things which perfectly equip their users to ‘think’ their own world” (Hebdige 1979: 103). Thinking the world, mapping it, intervening in it – I believe that these, not the purity of frictionless systematicity, define the purpose of cultural studies theorizing. Consequently, rather than to simply adopt or outright reject new materialist or speculative realist

work, I suggest it focus on the finding of *tools* that can be used. This, of course, is precisely the approach Deleuze and Foucault encouraged vis-à-vis their own writing (Foucault 1996: 76). What is cultural studies if not a large toolbox? It is a heterogeneous, inter- or transdisciplinary theoretical assemblage, gathering and pulling together concepts and methods from a wide variety of sources for the purpose of intellectual work, understood as a political practice (cf. Cord 2022a, 2022c). Tools are there not to be marveled at as a beautiful harmonious ensemble, but to be put to use. As Stuart Hall, whose own thinking stands testament to this, pointed out, “there is something at stake in cultural studies”; it is, he said, “a serious enterprise”, “a practice which aims to make a difference in the world” (1996: 263, 264). Its vocation is ‘worldly’. For this purpose, promising tools need to be identified, in a variety of sources, and articulated to the cultural studies project. This will frequently involve a process of *translation*, in the anti-essentialist and anti-teleological sense in which Hall and others have used this term. In other words, what is required, in keeping with the word’s Latin etymology, is a ‘transfer’, a ‘transport’, a ‘transformation’, that is to say, some work of recoding and recontextualization.

In other words, it is, to use Haraway’s terminology, a question of bringing the discipline of cultural studies and the approaches of the nonhuman turn into an ‘encounter’ (cf. Cord 2022b, 2022c), one that leaves none of the participants unchanged, but transforms them through new relations (as Barad [2007] teaches us, *relata* never precede and are not independent of their relations). Regarding cultural studies, the outcomes of such an encounter include an increased awareness for the productivity and dynamics of material processes, where matter is understood not in essentialist terms but as contingent, variable, and flexible; the discarding of modern dualisms such as nature and culture, mind and body, human and nonhuman, replaced by a sharpened analytic focus on the processes through which such boundaries are erected, maintained, but also contested; a renegotiation or extension of the realm of the political, marked, for instance, by important reconceptualizations of notions of agency and subjectivity or by new forms of the study of power; an intensified interest for and engagement with knowledge produced by the natural sciences; and, last but not least, an explicitly postanthropocentric ethics, revolving around the relations, dependencies, and interdependencies with human and nonhuman others, and focused, among other things, on issues of accountability, response-ability (Haraway 2016), and care.

Such an encounter enriches the other approaches as well. If you take, say, some of the new materialisms as an example, cultural studies allows for a very productive refraction or, as Barad (2007) might say, ‘diffraction’, based on some of the aspects that define cultural studies: I am

thinking here of its emphasis on contingency and its rigorous contextualism, its attention to complexity, its dedication to the concrete, and its conviction of what we may call the primacy of the political. Taken together, all this may serve as a welcome corrective to what critics such as Thomas Lemke (2021) and Katharina Hoppe (Hoppe and Lemke 2021), whose argument I follow very closely here (cf. esp. Hoppe and Lemke 2021: 156f), have described as the overly affirmative orientation of some new materialist thinking, which – for instance, the work of Jane Bennett or Rosi Braidotti – sometimes tends to romanticize the relationality it highlights against older, essentialist ontologies, as something that is per se and always *good*. That is, implicitly or explicitly, it is assumed that once the fact of ontological interdependence, openness and fluidity is affirmed, an existence that is more ‘green’ or even post-capitalist, more just, egalitarian, and democratic, will more or less automatically follow. What this fails to consider is that relationality is neither inherently good nor bad. Actually, such an assumption only runs the risk of a reintroduction of essentialism through the back door. Fluidity and plasticity are not at all incompatible with some of the more recent modes through which power is exercised and capitalist surplus value is generated. Thus, Thomas Lemke (2021), taking his cue from a few rather brief remarks made by Foucault in his lectures, has recently spoken of ‘environmentality’ as a neoliberal mode of government that represents a current trend towards an ‘ecologization of power’, insofar as this form of governmentality explicitly addresses issues of the environment and programmatically operates through attempts to act upon and regulate, *not* ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’, but, precisely, processes and webs of relations. This, in other words, is a dispositive that is based on a decidedly *ecological* understanding of the environment, as having to do with dynamic processes, circulations, flows, etc., and where these are understood as being material-semiotic and natural-cultural in character. So here, the nonhuman is precisely *not* ignored and matter *not* treated as passive and static – instead, nonhuman organisms, geological forces, or technological artefacts are expressly mobilized in specific ways in order to establish and preserve particular social regimes and ways of life. We may, for instance, think of concepts such as resilience, ecosystem services, or natural capital here, all of which do not at all signal a break with capitalism but aim in the direction of an ‘ecologically conscious’ regime that controls and capitalizes natural processes in a ‘sustainable’ way (Hoppe and Lemke 2021: 157). As Lemke summarizes: “The ‘nonhuman turn’ [...] and the move beyond anthropocentric ontologies is not at all incompatible with techno-managerial projects and capitalist imaginaries” (2021: 189).

Thus, instead of assuming that the insight into the radical relationality of the world always already makes a difference politically, we need to hold on the principle of contingency (Hoppe and Lemke

2021: 165) – that is to say, what needs to be analyzed are the concrete materialities, textures, and articulations of relations that are always specific (how are they structured? how are they being mobilized? by whom? for what purposes? ...). The political significance of relations as well as of the principles of fluidity, indeterminacy and openness is itself unstable and flexible (Hoppe and Lemke 2021: 158). Rather than to presume that an alternative, relational understanding of ontology will inevitably result in a radical politics, I believe that we should insist that there is no necessary causal connection between ontology and politics. Relations do not exist all by themselves but are articulated in always specific ways by and with a host of agentic forces (both ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’) and sets of practices. And that means that if we want to transform our modes of existence, it is precisely these practices and articulations that we need to address and alter (though without thereby resorting to a simplistic, liberal and voluntaristic understanding of agency or the subject!). Indeed, following Science and Technology Studies, we may want to insist that the study of ontology actually requires an empirical and praxeological approach, insofar as realities and ways of being are never really pre-given in a kind of transhistorical, universal way, but come into existence and are stabilized through specific sets of material-discursive practices or ‘modes of doing’. That is, the make-up of the world is effectively a *performative* affair: ontologies are constituted, ‘done’, enacted – they come into being through particular regimes of practices, not the other way round. They are “relational effects enacted in practices” (Lemke 2021: 148). And consequently, they can be changed.

What all of this amounts to – and this is exactly my point here – is a stronger focus on the *political* dimensions of ontological questions. In other words: The encounter between cultural studies and the new materialism (or the nonhuman turn more generally) entails a *politicization of ontology*, an extension of the political into the ontological. Instead of embracing relationality per se, as some new materialist work is prone to do, a posthumanist cultural studies approach inquires into how relations are materially composed, assembled, and articulated, and addresses this itself as a site of struggle. After all, since ontologies are not essential but contingent, local and temporary, they must principally be understood as embattled and conflictual. Here, I believe the encounter or articulation with key elements from within the cultural studies toolbox – I am thinking, for instance, of the theory of hegemony – can prove tremendously productive: Among other things, it may sharpen our sensitivity for the fact that the materialization of every relation, the composition of every assemblage, inevitably involves, indeed *depends upon*, a process of exclusion or abjection of other, alternative possibilities, that is, on the production of a ‘constitutive outside’ (cf. Papadopoulos 2010a, 2014). As John Law and Marianne Lien stress, it is important to “attend not

just to ontologies enacted, but also to their shadowland of alterities”, to the “not quite realised realities” (2012: 373, 363). These remainders and exteriorities inescapably continue to haunt, destabilize, and contest existing configurations. That is, in the domain of ontology too, antagonism is – at least principally – ineradicable. What Rancière (1999) calls ‘disagreement’ concerns not only ‘orders of the visible and sayable’, but what may be called ‘orders of the existable’, orders of being (cf. Papadopoulos 2018). A perspective diffracted by or through cultural studies brings these exclusions, asymmetries, and instabilities that accompany all material-discursive processes of constitution into sharp(er) focus. At the same time, and relatedly, I think more attention would then be paid to hegemonic, durable, long-lasting constellations (Hoppe and Lemke 2021: 78). This is another important shift in emphasis. Whereas new materialist work can tend to overemphasize contingency and radical openness, permanent mutability, and endless becoming – or, in a Deleuzian idiom, the forces of deterritorialization – we *also* must address and study the processes of (re-)territorialization, that is, the conditions and ways in which relations are *stabilized*, reproduced, and sustained – and that includes/means relations of domination and subordination. While the new materialism is certainly right to de-essentialize and, to borrow a term of the English philosopher Nick Land (2011: 273), to ‘de-thing’ entities, and to underscore the basic instability and processuality of the world, relations nevertheless *do* assume stability, ontologies *do* sediment and congeal into at least temporarily set arrangements. This stability is not pre-given and primordial, it is not inevitable and for all time, but it does exist. As Frédéric Neyrat has argued, the notion of relationality needs to be complemented by what he calls a “*counterprinciple of separation*” (2019: 14). Borrowing a term frequently used in the theory of hegemony, we may perhaps speak of an ‘arbitrary closure’ or of a provisional ‘suturing’ of relations here. Concepts such as these (the already mentioned articulation is another one) are extremely helpful to move beyond the unhelpful dichotomies – unhelpful both analytically and politically – that structure some of the discourses in which we currently think and speak about these matters: roots vs. routes, monads vs. nomads, etc. (and here, these debates to some extent actually reproduce some of the issues and impasses that already emerged in discussions within and about poststructuralism). So, echoing an argument made in a different context by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001: 154-56), I believe it is not enough – again, neither analytically nor politically – to simply accentuate and mobilize relationality, processuality, and (vital) materiality against alleged cultural norms of fixity and stability. Instead, what is necessary is to focus on the level of *production* – the production of relations, of stability and mutability, of closure and openness, etc. This is one key site of political struggle today: the control of this production, in a collective, democratic, egalitarian, and non-

anthropocentric way – its ‘commoning’ – and with the goal of enabling livable, just futures for the many – alternative worldings, ‘alterontologies’, terraformation from below (Papadopoulos 2018).

So, in theoretical terms, what transpires here is something like a postfoundational, *hegemony theory of ontology*, where ontology emerges more clearly than before as “a vital and contested political terrain” (Morton 2013: 20), a realm of power relations. Here, what we may call ‘ontopolitics’ encompasses, but also goes beyond the more ‘formalist’ ‘assembly politics’ proposed by ANT in the direction of the more mundane, everyday ‘politics of matter’ advocated by thinkers like Papadopoulos, dedicated to the concrete, on-the-ground, practical and experimental rearticulation of the material conditions of existence – let’s emphasize that “ontology is ordinary”! And this ontopolitics might perhaps be thought about in ways analogous to those proposed by Raymond Williams (1977: 121-27) for the study of cultures, that is, in terms of hegemonic, residual, and emergent and of dominant, alternative, and oppositional ontologies. At the same time, such a focus on questions of ontology, important as it is, would always need to be complemented by and connected to an attention to the level of political economy, and ontopolitics consequently coupled with a politics of redistribution (cf. Fraser 1995), that is, a more ‘direct’ and ‘open’ opposition to power in the shape of struggles for the abolition or transformation of particular institutions, laws, economic relations, etc. Following Gramsci and his notion of the ‘war of position’, we still need to fight on several fronts and strive for the articulation of different terrains (or ‘trenches’) of struggle (now including that of ontology). For me, this, to borrow a phrase of Papadopoulos’ (2010b), would be a truly political, ‘insurgent posthumanism’.

Such an undertaking as I have outlined it here, bringing cultural studies and the new materialism or the nonhuman turn more generally into a contact zone, is of course not without its obstacles. Though there is no space to pursue this further here, a number of tensions and conflicts will have to be addressed as well (cf. Cord 2022b, 2022c), whether it is the friction between constructivist and realist epistemologies, the question of the social totality, or the status of critique, to name just a few. Yet, on the whole, it is my impression that both, the rhetoric of innovation on the part of the new approaches as well as the accent on differences and clashes on both sides have been somewhat exaggerated (think, e.g., of the alleged radical ‘culturalism’ or ‘textualism’ of poststructuralist theories). Ultimately, I believe it is fruitful to shift the focus from the search for differences to potential points of contact, cross-fertilization and to possible alliances between the new and older – critical, poststructuralist, materialist – movements. Let the work of articulation begin!

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