

INTERVENTION

Situating New Materialism

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New materialism has become one of the most influential paradigms in the humanities and social sciences. While it has contributed to a more nuanced perspective on knowledge production processes, highlighting their situatedness and physical-material basis, how the emergence of new materialism is itself rooted in a specific time and place has seldom been studied. In this contribution, I ask how the economic and political conditions its approaches were created under have shaped early and influential strands of new materialist thought, such as actor-network theory and the social studies of marketization. I show that they mirror processes of economic and political restructuring and the rise of neoliberal thought through three examples—the question of the social, the creation of markets, and the human-non-human divide—and discuss how the more recent shift towards forms of new ‘vitalist’ materialism may relate to the emergence of new forms of ‘biotechnological’ capitalism and related forms of valuation. I close with a call to ‘situate’ new materialist approaches by paying closer attention to the positionality of their proponents and by expanding the definition of the ‘material condition’ of knowledge production in order to be able to create the conditions for alternative, non-neoliberal anthropocenes.

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Introduction

Taken together, new materialist approaches have become one of the most important paradigms of our time. With roots in ethnographic research on scientific processes (Knorr-Cetina 1981; Callon et al. 1986; Latour 1987, 1988), anthropological studies on human/non-human relations (Descola and Pálsson 1996), feminist science of technology (Haraway 1991), and other practices, the broad and diverse field of new materialism today is an inspiration for a wide range of disciplines, ranging from philosophy and history to design and economics, shaping both theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. New materialist approaches have questioned the formerly dominant view on non-human actors in modern sciences and societies, pointed to blind spots in scientific approaches, and brought actors, entities, and processes to light that had previously been understudied or overlooked. They have shown that matter ‘matters’ (Barad 2007), and that materialities are not the passive background of human actions but play an active role in the constitution of our worlds.

Despite this remarkable success, there have been surprisingly few reflections on the development of the field itself, contextualizing and analysing it in relation to the broader conditions under which academic research (and human and non-human existence more generally)

take place. To be clear, there has been wide and intense engagement by new materialist researchers with their own field, its history, and possible future directions, as an impressive number of edited volumes on the issue show (Blok et al. 2019; Coole and Frost 2010; Ellenzweig and Zammito 2017b; van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2012; Law and Hassard 1999). These accounts have traced major and minor differences of new materialism’s different expressions, enabled dialogue across disciplinary conventions and traditions, and worked towards cohesion in an increasingly diverse and heterogenous field. Yet these accounts have remained restricted to a rather limited view ‘from within’, tracing the emergence and differentiation of new materialist thought in terms of their own logic, without situating these aspects in the wider field of contemporary knowledge production and dissimulation. The absence of such critical self-reflection is especially striking because the importance of the physical-material basis for the production of knowledge has been a central theme in new materialist research for almost four decades (Latour and Woolgar 1987; Barad 1996; Akrich et al. 2006). New materialist thought is, like any other intellectual project, rooted in a specific time and place, and the refusal to acknowledge and critically examine the economic and political conditions it was produced under contributes, I would argue, to the impasse of at least part of the dominant frameworks of new materialism that scholars have diagnosed recently, in the form of an ‘ambivalent sign of [...] simultaneous success and demise’ (Fariás et al. 2019, xx).

In this contribution I am using this diagnosis as a starting point to further explore what it would mean to 'situate' new materialism and how such a perspective can contribute to further development of its approaches. Building on existing critical debates on the relationship between actor–network theory (ANT), new materialist thinking, and the political and economic developments of the last decades, I ask the following: what if we acknowledge that new materialist thought is itself a child of its time? What if its most important contributions have, at least in part, been reacting to or mirroring ongoing developments in the economic, social, and political fields? What if the theories it has developed have not been purely 'performative' (MacKenzie et al. 2007), but at least in part, and maybe unconsciously, have both contributed to and described processes already underway?

I investigate these questions as follows: first, I explain in greater detail what I understand as 'new materialism', showing that, despite their differences, the approaches currently under this rubric are defined by their opposition towards both the 'modern' condition and post-structuralism, by their posthumanist stance, and by their specific epistemological disposition, assuming the possibility of or invoking a non-mediated access to the world. Further, I revisit existing lines of criticism of new materialist thinking in order to show how my proposal of 'situating' new materialism builds on these. In the following section I use the example of three prominent and related issues of new materialist thought to show that they are each deeply embedded in the processes of economic restructuring of the times in which they respectively emerged—the 'dissolution' of the social, the studies of marketization processes, and the battle for the end of 'nature'—before I discuss the more recent shift from a 'network' approach towards 'vitalist' forms of new materialism in relation to this thesis. I conclude by suggesting three avenues of further research and resources for the development of new concepts of materialist thought in order to effectively engage with the current ecological and economic challenges of our time.

Critically Debating New Materialist Approaches

The question of what new materialism is—and what it is not—has been intensively debated for more than two decades, and the debate has concerned both parts of the term: 'materialism' and 'new' (Lettow 2016). Over time, the task of defining it has not become easier, as with its increasing popularity, new materialist thinking has spread and multiplied into a diverse and heterogeneous array of approaches. This is further complicated by the fact that theoretical sources and intellectual trajectories are controversial, or even contradictory, within the field itself. To name just one example, some scholars regard Marx as an important inspiration for their inquiry (Braidotti et al. 2012, 25), whereas others stress their opposition to Marxist versions of materialism (DeLanda 2008; Latour 1994). This may relate to the specific methodology of new materialist thinking as 'open-ended and experimental becoming' (Fariás et al. 2019, xxiii), but it further complicates the process of locating new materialist thinking in a history

of philosophical approaches and drawing a conceptual map of the field. Although it is not possible here to go into depth regarding these debates, there are a range of commonalities among new materialist thinkers that distinguish them from other schools of thought. I choose to refer to 'new materialism' in a broad sense, following Fariás et al. (2019, xxiii), as 'an expanded field of post-, non- or more-than-humanist problematisations of the common world(s) we construct and inhabit'. This includes a diverse array of approaches that hold at least three characteristics in common. *First*, they are characterized by a posthumanist stance, including a renewed or pronounced interest in the non-human/other-than-human/more-than-human, the physical–material basis of the world or 'matter', granting it 'agency' (or other forms of 'doing'; Abrahamsson et al. 2015) by itself while, at the same time, decentring the 'human' in its analysis. *Second*, and relatedly, these approaches stand in double opposition to, on one side, what they consider the 'modern' condition or Enlightenment thinking and its dualistic conceptions of the world (nature/culture, subject/object, etc.), in which they also see historical and dialectical materialism as being rooted, and, on the other side, to poststructuralist approaches and their focus on linguistics, discourse, and representations. *Third*, they consider themselves 'realists', proclaiming a specific epistemology based on the assumption that the essence of the world or its entities can be accessed more or less directly, instead of being mediated through either language or social constructs, be it through the analysis of hybrid networks that include the researcher, 'intra-action' with and among objects, or philosophical contemplation. When referring to new materialism, I therefore include the area of new materialist thinking that has developed around (or 'after') actor–network theory, with its focus on hybrid networks (Latour 2004, 2005; Law and Hassard 1999; Blok et al. 2019), as well as ontology-oriented posthumanist and new vitalist approaches which have come to prominence more recently and consider themselves 'new materialist' in an original sense (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2012), notwithstanding their different conceptions of the 'material' itself (see Abrahamsson et al. 2015). I will come back to these different conceptualizations in a later section.

When new materialist approaches became prominent across the social sciences and humanities in the 2000s, scholars from fields such as political economy and urban geography critically discussed whether the 'flat ontologies' ANT or assemblage thinking and the rejection of any 'meta'-concepts might compromise or complicate the analysis of capitalist dynamics or power relations in general (Swyngedouw 2011; Brenner et al. 2011). Over the last decade, this criticism has in many fields died down; instead, some scholars have, in a quite pragmatic approach, started to use the tools that new materialist approaches provide to analyse the 'inner working' of neoliberal capitalism and the concrete manifestation and stabilization of regimes of governance (Sullivan 2018; Birch et al. 2018). However, some of the points raised in initial debates and the usefulness (and dangers) of posthumanist

and new materialist approaches, especially those relating to ontological and epistemological questions, continue to be valid and deserve renewed attention—especially in light of a more and more apparent shift in new materialist thinking towards theories and sometimes even ideologies of the far right that stand in a striking contrast to the proclaimed self-perception of the field as an anti-hegemonial or decolonial intellectual project (Ellenzweig and Zammito 2017a; see also Last 2026).

In the discipline of sociology—especially German-speaking sociology—the theoretical origins of much new materialist work were critically discussed early on, as were their possible political implications (Lindemann 2009; Garske 2014; Werber 2015; Hoppe and Lemke 2015; Gertenbach 2016). Also, Harman (2014, 13) acknowledges the danger that, based on Latour's Hobbesian understanding of politics, Latour's general notion of politics may be reduced to 'might makes right' (see also Harman 2014, 31). Politics would thus be equated with power, understood as the ability of networks to successfully establish and maintain themselves by finding 'enough allies', making concepts like morality or responsibility obsolete. In his later work, Latour considerably shifted in this regard, pointing increasingly to the responsibility of establishing networks 'in the right way' (Latour 2014a, 2014b, 2017; see also Battistoni 2023), and many of the different variations of ANT and new materialism have followed this example: they consider paying attention to all kinds of actor as a form of political intervention. Nevertheless, scholars have repeatedly struggled with this concept of the political. They have pointed to the difficulty of the positive stance of new materialism to conceptualize the contrafactual, what is silenced, what is not, or what 'things *could* become' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, 96; see also Harman 2014; Noys 2014).

This affirmative stance towards existing power relations has been interpreted in different ways. Ruckenstein (2025) has attributed it to the 'naivety' of many materialist thinkers regarding the political process. Rekret (2018), in contrast, argues that the 'image of the researcher as a blank slate' (26) proposed by new materialism has proven quite attractive to researchers, liberating them from the arduous work of critically reflecting on their 'own possibly compromised subject-position' (Rekret 2018, 28) and reintroducing a comfortable 'gaze from nowhere' (see Haraway 1988, 581). Mirowski and Nik-Khah (2007) go even further in their argument: they see ANT and related approaches as rooted in the post-war discipline of 'operations research', due to its background in military studies and its history of scholars from engineering and the natural sciences working to 'solve' social political problems in a technocratic way without bothering to fully engage with the social sciences and their complex history. They relate this to the observation that new materialist approaches such as ANT have concentrated their efforts to 'deconstruct' existing scientific approaches almost exclusively within the social sciences while adopting knowledge from the natural sciences in an often completely uncritical way—in sharp contrast to the original impulse of science and technology studies (a point that

would apply to an even greater degree to the more recent approaches of new materialism; see Pinch 2011). Far from being a radical movement, parts of new materialism—as well as the 'performativity' school in economics—would then instead be part of a hegemonic project, and their success could be explained, at least partly, by the fact that these approaches fit so well in a technocratic and neoliberalized society (Fuller 2000; see also Noys 2014). I build on this line of criticism below.

New Materialist Thought in Its Time

Many of the points raised against ANT and new materialist approaches have been brought forward—also from a progressive perspective—against other 'new' theories. Poststructuralists were accused of their focus on language overlooking the importance of material-economic conditions, and the conceptualization of power as relational and productive was critically discussed when it was first introduced by Foucault. There is, however, an important difference: Foucault's detailed descriptions of the workings of different dispositifs are always rooted in a very specific time and place; they are 'historically conditioned' (Kendall and Michael 2001). By contrast, new materialist accounts of conceptualizations of networks, events, and 'things' are, in many cases, not only written from a point of 'nowhere' but also from a point of 'n/ever'. As Harman critically observes, Latour, in his 2018 book on 'modes of existence' (Latour 2018), aims to provide an 'anthropology of the moderns', but, while dealing with modernity, he

never delimits its precise geographical or temporal scope. Do Russia and Turkey belong to the Moderns? Did Japan join the list at some point? Do the United States and Canada deploy the same modes of existence as Europe? None of these questions are addressed. Nor do I recall even a single calendar date in the book, though the reader might have wished to know when and how some of the modes began in historical time. (Harman 2014, 92)

To further develop new materialist approaches, I argue, it is necessary to leave this 'neverland of research' and to situate both new materialist theory-making and its success in a very specific historical time and place. In the following subsections I will use three basic claims of ANT and the performativity of markets school to exemplify the close relation between these theoretical approaches and the neoliberal conditions of the time in which they emerged.

Destroying the social

While new materialism was and is a very diverse field, the works of Latour and other representants of ANT are by far its most influential and most quoted texts, especially in those disciplines that are not part of the new materialist field itself but have become increasingly influenced by new materialist thought. The fact that I refer often here to Latour's work reflects his prominence in the wider social sciences, and also in my discipline, geography. To

quote Latour, however, remains somewhat tricky, as he published a great deal and made far-reaching and often contradictory statements on a wide range of issues. As soon one cites a quotation or text from him as evidence for a certain stance, there will be another that seems to prove he represented quite the opposite (just remember him 'recalling' his own theory, ANT, in 1999, and recalling that recall a few years later; see Latour 2005, 93). However, he was consistent in one point: his fierce rejection of the concept of 'society'. He was already arguing against the 'society', in the form sociologists understood the word, in *Politics of Nature* (Latour 2004), and in 2005 he devoted a whole monograph to this argument, *Reassembling the Social* (Latour 2005),¹ in which he explains that

there is nothing specific to social order; that there is no social dimension of any sort, no 'social context', [...] actors are never embedded in a social context and so are always much more than 'mere informants'; that there is thus no meaning in adding some 'social factors' to other scientific specialties; that political relevance obtained through a 'science of society' is not necessarily desirable; and that 'society', far from being the context 'in which' everything is framed, should rather be construed as one of the many connecting elements circulating inside tiny conduits. (Latour 2005, 4–5)

This sounds strangely familiar to everyone who has at least partly followed the political and economic development of the last decades; this similarity is so obvious that not only did almost every reviewer writing about this book feel the urge to refer to Thatcher's famous quote that there is 'no such thing as society', but Latour even quotes her in the respective paragraph himself (Latour 2005, 5).

Latour was definitely not the only one at that time criticizing the rigidity and formality of structuralist approaches to society; similar arguments had been raised across different disciplines and across the political spectrum. And he was definitely pointing to an important question by asking what exactly it is that 'makes' a society or the 'social': which processes, practices, and human and non-human encounters are necessary to stabilize it. But his fight against not only concepts like society but also the concept he proposes instead—loose 'associations' of non-social entities, both humans and non-humans, assembling and dissolving in ever-changing formations according to their interests—inevitably evokes the neoliberal program 'to organize individualism', one of the objectives formulated at the founding meeting of early neoliberals around Walter Lippmann in 1938 in Paris (Zmirak 2001, 11, quoted in Plehwe 2009, 15). In his raging against the concept of society as used by sociologists—especially French sociologists—there is, still, a hint that Latour is aware of the possible effects of either referring to society or, from a performative perspective, evoking the notion of society for political or strategic reasons when he writes that the concept of society 'has been productive and probably necessary in the past' (Latour 2004, 1) and 'rendered many useful services in an earlier period' (Latour 2004, 8). This

was written in the early 2000s, and it would be interesting to know what exactly he refers to here: when had the concept been 'productive', and for whom? If he argues that the 'broad project that had given its impetus to the sociology of the social, from its inception in the mid-19th century to the end of the last one, has now weakened' (Latour 2005, 247), then why has this happened? What and who has contributed to its decline? And how does an ANT-inspired version of new materialism relate to this—is it merely describing this process, aiming at initiating or accelerating it, or actively contributing to it?

Making markets

Similar questions can be asked regarding my second example. Marketization studies, also called Social Studies of Economization (Çalışkan and Callon 2009) or Social Studies of Economization and Marketization (Ouma 2015), became prominent when important figures in science and technology studies, such as Michel Callon, turned from an analysis of research processes towards economics (Callon 2009; Çalışkan and Callon 2009, 2010). It has dissected some of the most important economic entities, such as economic laws or the notion of 'the economy' itself (Mitchell 2005), showing how markets are 'produced' and stabilized through 'market devices', tools, protocols, practices, artefacts, and technological systems (Callon et al. 2007). Economic thought, as MacKenzie (2008) concluded, acts as 'an engine not a camera': far from describing economic principles it 'finds' in the data, economics forms the world according to its principles (MacKenzie et al. 2007). One of the central claims of the social studies of markets is that markets are not something 'natural': they need to be 'made' and constantly stabilized to continue working.

The scholars of economization who approached these questions were lucky. In the late 1990s and the early 2000s, when they became interested in processes of economization and the creation of markets, there was abundant material to study: markets were being created all around them (Callon 2007). Former state services, properties, and institutions were being privatized, leading to a boom in new markets in housing, health, and education (Birch and Siemiatycki 2016); trade was liberalized, supply chains started to stretch over the entire globe (Gibbon et al. 2008; Bair et al. 2013), and financial markets rose to become a dominant economic force (Preda and Knorr-Cetina 2005). New commodities and related markets emerged, e.g., around 'environmental services': Callon could study the creation of carbon markets as 'ongoing collective experiments' (Callon 2009) because until the 1990s there had never been any market for trading carbon emission permits, and to make money with a 'right to pollute' would have seemed quite absurd to many only a few years earlier.

The interest many of the new materialist thinkers had in the creation of markets was not independent from the neoliberal wave of privatization and marketization that started in the 1980s and 1990s, the effects of which were becoming more and more apparent right at the time when scholars from the social sciences became interested

in economization. Still, prominent authors from these fields, such as Michel Callon, Fabian Muniesa, or Donald MacKenzie, were not very interested in reflecting on these shifts and how they might affect or 'co-create' the results of their research. Few, if any, situated their own knowledge within that specific moment of time, or made clear that what they were studying was not the creation of markets as such, or 'general' processes of marketization or economization, but processes in a specific historical moment: the onset and triumph of neoliberalist economic thought and policy.

The idea that markets need to be created is a core element of neoliberal thought. Foucault has traced in detail the development of neoliberal ideas by their early proponents, including German neoliberalism centred around thinkers such as von Hayek, and later US neoliberalism and its model of *homo oeconomicus* (Foucault 2008). One of the most important differences Foucault points to between classical liberalism and neoliberalism is how these approaches frame markets, and the different assumptions they make of markets. As classical liberalism sees them, markets are something natural. They develop by themselves as long as they are not disturbed by state interventions—and states should therefore, according to this argument, just keep out, in a classic 'laissez-faire' approach, letting things 'develop on their own'. Neoliberalist thinkers, in contrast, see this differently: markets, they assume, do not develop on their own, springing out of nowhere—they have to be created. For neoliberals, Foucault argues, markets are not about exchange, but essentially about competition, and

competition as an essential economic logic will only appear and produce its effects under certain conditions which have to be carefully and artificially constructed. This means that pure competition is not a primitive given. It can only be the result of lengthy efforts and, in truth, pure competition is never attained. Pure competitions must and can only be an objective, an objective thus presupposing an indefinitely active policy. (Foucault 2008, 120)

Markets require active intervention, hard work, and a political will to create them whenever and wherever possible:

There will not be the market game, which much be left free, and then the domain in which the state begins to intervene, since the market, or rather pure competition, which is the essence of the market, can only apply if it is produced, and if it is produced by an active governmentality. (Foucault 2008, 121)

This sounds familiar to any scholar studying the social sciences of economization and marketization (SSEM). And indeed, the work of many recent scholars in this field resembles a detailed manual on how to create markets and commodities (French sociologists Luc Boltanski and

Ève Chiapello (2005) have shown in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* how managers draw on theories like ANT in order to improve the performance of their companies). It is no surprise that, especially in France, where most scholarship of SSEM originated, many prominent STS scholars have worked or are working at business schools, including Woolgar (Woolgar et al. 2009) and feminist new materialist Puig de la Bellacasa (2017). There has been little reflection in STS-inspired studies on how the production of markets was related to shifting ideas on markets when neoliberal economic thought started to dominate economics, or on how these parallel developments in these disciplines—closely related in both their interests and their concrete localization—influenced each other, in one direction or the other.

Making things the same

This dynamic also applies to the third case: the dissolution of the human/non-human divide. Here, we find a much wider and much more diverse field compared to the studies on marketization, as to overcome anthropocentrism is a core objective of all new materialist approaches. Yet there is a similar silence on the material–economic conditions present when its core theoretical elements were developed. The work of Latour and his colleagues can also serve as an example here. *Politics of Nature* (Latour 2004), which first appeared in French in 1999, is a harsh critique of both the natural and social sciences, their way of producing 'truths', and the continued separation of the spheres of politics and science: 'on the one hand, we have the chattering of fictions; on the other, the silence of reality' (Latour 2004, 14). Latour calls for this dualist approach to be overcome, and he brings forward the idea of a symmetrical approach: to treat humans and non-humans (at least *a priori*) the same, to apply the same terms for actions of humans and non-humans alike—plants refuse, pistols kill, mosquitos speak.

This sounded provocative, even revolutionary, at the time of its publication, and there is no doubt that it can create new insights, new attention, and new perspectives, being one of the first of many different proposals brought forward from the 1990s onwards on how to overcome modern dualism and frame the world in and around us differently. However, at the time Latour wrote these texts, the idea was not entirely new. On the contrary, in some regards, what he demanded—to treat humans and non-humans alike—was already underway. As more and more parts of society became integrated into markets (however fragile and imperfect those markets were), entities that had previously been part of very different and separate valuation schemes became part of the same system of economic valuation. Genetic variation, immaterial goods, indigenous knowledge, the ability of trees to breathe: they all started being evaluated through the same system, classified according to the same criteria, traded against each other. Indeed, many scholars from the field of SSEM have published detailed accounts of this process of 'making things the same' (MacKenzie 2009). This is not to say that such practices and forms of equalization had not existed before. But they were now reaching a

much wider scale, embracing areas of the human and non-human worlds that, previously, because of certain assumptions, beliefs, or traditions—taboos, one could say—had remained closed to capitalist commodification. The human is one such domain: when the term ‘human capital’, first used in the 1960s by proponents of the neoliberal Chicago school, became more widespread in the 1990s, many people opposed it, arguing that the ‘human’, either for religious or humanist reasons, cannot be ‘capitalized’, that it holds an intrinsic value and can and should not be measured in economic terms. Drawing on Foucault’s works, authors like Bröckling (2007; Bröckling et al. 2000) have traced how entrepreneurial logics entered the human self and how techniques of government and control led to the internalization of economic logics into human subjects. By 2001, when the term became officially adopted by international organizations like the OECD, the combination of the two words seemed, to most people, no longer strange at all. ‘Nature’ is another field where attempts at commodification were initially met with resistance: ‘Nature’ with a capital N had been considered ‘holy’ by many who fought for its protection, either as God’s creation or for its own ecological or spiritual value. That water, forests, and nature are ‘not for sale’ is still a common slogan among protesters at climate or biodiversity summits or radical environmental NGOs. But it has become increasingly rare since 1992, when the Earth Summit of the United Nations in Rio de Janeiro initiated a new wave of global environmental policies—policies that were based to a large extent on the creation of commodities and markets for ‘environmental’ or ‘natural’ services and goods. These processes of economization have been intensively and critically discussed as the ‘neoliberalization’ of nature (Heynen et al. 2007; McCarthy and Prudham 2004; Castree 2009; Gutiérrez 2011), but despite these criticisms, they have become the hegemonic approach to environmental governance. Is the gradual dissolution of the categories of ‘human’ and ‘nature’ in Western societies therefore an effect that new materialist thought has initiated or contributed to? Which role did the ‘ecological crisis’—or the appearance of such ‘fuzzy objects’, as Latour frames it—play (Latour 2004, 20)? And to what extent was the emergence of these theories a reflection or theorization of economic processes that happened at that time: the gradual integration of more and more kinds of entity and process, material or not, into the capitalist economic system?

Latour was aware of these processes of economization—and he was, at first, far from opposing them. By contrast, he welcomed them. Economic valuation, he wrote in *Politics of Nature*, was one good example of how the equal treatment of humans and non-humans could be practised:

If we stop a moment to measure the immense difficulties of the tasks of hierarchy and institution, we can readily grasp the crucial contribution of the economizers, for they are going to make it possible to give a *common language* to the heterogeneous set of entities that have to form a hierarchy.

Nothing could link black holes, rivers, transgenic soy beans, farmers, the climate, human embryos, and humanized pigs in an ordered relation, in one single cosmogram. Thanks to the economic calculation, all these entities become at least commensurable. [...] Instead of defending its virtues by imagining a metaphysics, an anthropology, and a psychology entirely invented to serve its own utopia, as was done in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, perhaps in the twenty-first century we may finally recognize from its account books that economics has the unique capacity to give a common language to those whose task is precisely to discover the best of the common worlds. (Latour 2004, 151–52)

Latour did not mind the one-dimensionality of this form of ‘equal’ valuation, or further discuss the consequences it might have, such as the fact that economic valuation needs to be profit-oriented in a capitalist society; marketization scholars such as Callon have also refrained from criticizing the commodification of ‘nature’, pointing instead to markets’ ‘unquestionable advantages that make them irreplaceable’ and to the ‘creation and innovation’ they stimulate (Callon 2009, 535). In his research on carbon markets, Callon opted for a ‘pragmatic attitude’ concentrating on ‘market design’ to minimize failures and allow the efficient functioning of the envisioned market (Callon 2009, 536). This ‘pragmatic’ approach treats the creation of capitalist markets for human skills and living beings, as well as their characteristic features and capabilities, as just one network among many possible others. The result is far from the indigenous cosmologies that are often invoked when referring to new materialist approaches. Instead of assigning a specific, non-reduceable value to non-humans and other beings, human and non-human actors alike are stripped of their intrinsic qualities; they can then be scientifically studied and quantified in economic terms. This makes sense from a neoliberal economic point of view: the intrinsic value of humans and non-humans alike, be it for religious, humanist, or ecological reasons, has for a long time been an obstacle to the further commodification of fields that have remained excluded from capitalist logics. These barriers have, with the advancement of posthumanist and post-naturalist worldviews, been increasingly breached.

The value of matter

In the prior sections, I have mainly referred to ANT and the different perspectives that have grown out of it. These, however, only represent a small fraction of new materialist thought. Since the late 2000s a new, ‘vitalist’ school of posthumanist thought has gained in prominence, challenging, in some disciplines, the dominance of ANT-inspired new materialism. The three examples presented above would, to different degrees, also apply to this ‘vitalist’ version of new materialist thinking. There are, however, some interesting differences—interesting especially in relation to the shifting foci of economic valuation.

Feminist STS scholars such as Donna Haraway (1997) have observed that the ‘nature’ Latour writes of is of a ‘technical’ nature, one coined by scientific discourses and men, and ‘far from sufficiently lively’ (Asdal 2019, 339). In a similar line of criticism, authors such as Laurier and Philo have pointed to the fact that, especially in Latour’s early work, ‘just as the nonhumans are increasingly likened to humans, the humans involved are increasingly likened to nonhumans: or, more specifically, to machines’ (Laurier and Philo 1999, 1060), and that the mechanistic view of hybrid networks reflects the ‘cold’ logic of a networked capitalism (Fuller 2000; see also Noys 2014). The ‘vitalist’ currents of new materialist thought differ here: while they share the rejection of modern science and its methods, as well as the posthumanist orientation and post-representationalist epistemology of earlier strands of new materialism, they do not conceptualize material as ‘dead’, but, on the contrary, as full of life (Bennett 2010). This is an important difference—and one that, like the examples mentioned above, shows some contact points with recent developments: the increasing capitalist valuation of ‘life’ and its own capacities. While early observers like Rose wrote about the ‘politics of life itself’ from a Foucauldian perspective of biopower in relation to biomedicine and biotechnology, studies on this phenomenon became more widespread in the 2010s, with a whole range of research and publications in relation to terms such as ‘biocapitalism’ (Defalco 2017; Fumagalli and Morini 2021; Sunder Rajan 2006). Value generation, in this regard, is no longer restricted to extraction or intensification, but increasingly based on the intrinsic value and ‘liveliness’ of human and non-human beings—and on the technological and scientific instruments for assessing and using them. Related studies from biology and ecology are intensively referred to in new materialist thought, but while authors like Birch (2019) or Schurr (2017) have linked these developments to capitalist valorization, the question of why these capabilities of non-humans are now increasingly valued, or by whom and following which criteria, are aspects that are largely missing from the wider new materialist debate.

An Anthropocene Beyond Neoliberalism

Today, as influential as it is, new materialism is no longer ‘new’ to many disciplines. With the death of Bruno Latour in 2022, it has lost one of its most influential and dominant thinkers. This comes at a time of significant shifts and amidst emerging critical reflections in ANT and the wider new materialist circles themselves (Farías et al. 2019). Latour, in the last years of his life, becoming more and more concerned by the climate and environmental crises the planet is facing, increasingly reached the limits of his own approaches and started to refer to terms and concepts he had long rejected, such as ‘capitalism’ and ‘class’ (Latour 2014b, 2017; see also Battistoni 2023). A new generation of scholars of new materialism, working from different angles and less constrained by the animosities and intellectual struggles of times past, are working to revitalize understudied lines of thought and older critical

voices (Gleeson and O’Rourke 2021; Last 2026). This may be a moment to look back: a moment to start making the development and success of new materialist thought, as well as its different strands, itself an object of study, situating it not only in intellectual but also in economic and political history—and thereby overcoming some of its limits and further developing its thoughts. The tools for such a critical analysis are, to some extent, provided by new materialist approaches themselves: by feminist materialist thought, with its interest in the situatedness of knowledge, reflecting on and questioning the position of those speaking for others, human or non-human, and by the many variations of science and technology studies, with their interest in the relation between the settings and infrastructures of knowledge production and the knowledge produced.

There are several promising new avenues for such attempts. One is to critically reexamine and, where useful, to overcome the supposed opposition between older and newer strands of new materialism. To stress the differences between these approaches might have been a useful strategy when new materialism first began to form itself and to gain a voice in the scientific field, but now, decades later, this legacy could hinder theoretical development and adaptation to changing political and economic conditions rather than help to sharpen its intellectual profile. Furthermore, as several commentators have stressed, the insistence on this difference between old and new materialism is often based on a one-sided and misleading interpretation of sources and a simplified conception of modern thought and science (Ellenzweig and Zammito 2017a, 5–7), missing the uneven and contested reality of the modern project and the struggles that shaped it (see, e.g., Rosenberg and Yang 2014). The same is true for Marxist thought, which, in new materialist thought, is often (though not always) dismissed as part of the rejected project of modernity (Choat 2018; Noys 2014). But neither capitalism nor the analysis of it has ever been as homogeneous as many new materialist scholars assume. The encounter between old and new materialism can contribute to making both continuities and ruptures visible, and, as most research today is conducted under some form of capitalist conditions, it can also support a critical analysis of the conditions of knowledge production and the changing role of labour in it (Goto 2013), and of the ambivalences and contradictions in contemporary capitalism that cannot be overcome by the ‘right design’.

This point relates to the necessity of further investigating questions of limits and constraints. Brisset (2016), in his study on the organ trade, argues that ‘not all theories can be performative’ (Brisset 2016, 160): unlike the assumption common in ANT-based research on marketization processes that the market can basically be created anywhere and that market failure can be attributed to inner-market problems of design and ‘overflow’, he argues that there are limits to performativity and issues a call to ‘reintroduce the social world in the analysis in order [to] indicate the social conditions for performativity’ (Brisset 2016, 166). This question of constraints and limits (and

how they can be overcome) can serve as a starting point to further investigate the 'situatedness' of new materialist research: what are the wider contexts of phenomena observed, which relations can be made (easier), which are prohibited and excluded, and how? And, if one is allowed to ask the forbidden question, which patterns or structures can be observed thereby, and how are they made or stabilized?

Such a 'situated' approach would, finally, challenge the 'view from nowhere' that new materialist thought has been accused of and the strange silence of many new materialist and STS scholars on the economic conditions of knowledge production. Instead of 'posing the researcher [...] as a totally passive blank slate capable of registering the phenomena under investigation as an actor in its own right' (Rekret 2018, 26), it would not only widen analysis to the researcher themselves but also to the material conditions of knowledge production—considering not only physical–material environments but also economic–material environments. Everyone working in research knows that there are few aspects more decisive in terms of which knowledge is produced (and which not) than funding decisions, the creation or dissolution of funding schemes, and the economic security or precarity of those doing research. Such an expanded definition would mean paying closer attention to the 'embodiment' of knowledge production, not only in the form of 'partial' or 'situated knowledge' but also as co-produced by bodies that need to reproduce, also materially. It might entail turning more towards the 'condition of conditions', the unequal and heterogeneous power structures that shape which knowledge and which theories can be or will be (more easily) produced, who is able or encouraged to contribute to these processes and who is excluded, and how this affects the outcomes of these processes. Historicizing and, where necessary, provincializing new materialist approaches allows us to situate them in their specific times, places, and debates, but also to reflect on what would allow for the development of alternative approaches. If there is a neoliberal anthropocene, there can be other anthropocenes. Anthropocenes in which 'more-than-human worlds' are not based on the reduction of both humans and non-humans to mere machines or classified according to their economic value, where sociality and care beyond the human are not an empty wish, trampled on by the harsh reality of late neoliberalism. We need to look back to learn under which conditions alternative ways of commoning can flourish, and how we can create them.

Note

- 1 The book's original title is much closer to its content: *Changer de société—refaire de la sociologie* (Changing the society—remaking sociology, Latour 2006); this is also true of the German edition: *Eine neue Soziologie für eine neue Gesellschaft* (A new sociology for a new society, Latour 2007).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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