

REVIEW

Mysticism, Magical Materialism and Marxism in the Anthropocene

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This is a review of Benjamin Boysen's recent book, *The Embarrassment of Being Human: A Critical Essay on the New Materialisms and Modernity in an Age of Crisis*. Boysen's book argues that critical approaches today seek to deflect from the disastrousness of the world and the challenges involved in addressing contemporary crises. Focusing upon the rise of mystical, new materialist and speculative approaches that seek to decentre the human as agential subject, Boysen argues that these modes of critique move in the wrong direction. Rather than critical approaches, operating to salve our consciences, imagining that nothing can be done, and that humility is better than hubris, Boysen argues for a reassertion of the Enlightenment tradition, particularly in its most radical form, of the Marxist revolutionary project. The review suggests that the Anthropocene's impact in closing off modernist imaginaries of alternative futures is underestimated as is the attraction of the postmodern imaginary of futures which are necessarily held to be undetermined and open.

Keywords: New Materialism; Marxism; Anthropocene; Being Human

Benjamin Boysen, *The Embarrassment of Being Human: A Critical Essay on the New Materialisms and Modernity in an Age of Crisis* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2025). 384 pp.

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In today's world of the Anthropocene, critical theorists no longer centre class struggles against capitalism; instead, the world is full of 'windowless monads, infinite assemblages... vibrant matter, actants, hybrids and cyborgs' (p. 273). Benjamin Boysen poses a timely question of how to explain the contemporary success of these mystical forms of critique—new materialisms, speculative realisms, object-oriented ontologies, actor-networks and quantum realms of the virtual. These 'magical materialisms' (p. 274) seek to argue that the world as we know it is not real but a trick of the modernist imaginary that reduces the world to a 'small world' of representation and abstraction (Katzenstein 2026). The world as we know it is a prison, with invisible bars preventing us from accessing a reality of plenitude, a reality of infinite possibilities. In these irrational formulations, 'everything has been turned on its head', 'the real is the unreal, the unreal real' (p. 195).

Boysen argues that the appeal of theorists like Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Timothy Morton, Karen Barad, Graham Harman, Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti

(pp. 29–38) does not lie in their philosophical or scientific rigorosity but rather in the fact that they meet certain psychological and socio-political needs (p. xiv; p. 23). The irrationalism of new materialism expresses a distorted mirror-image of the irrationalism of our social existence. And, beyond this, is an expression of 'global delegitimization, distrust, or even resentment of the modern project' (p. 1). Ours is an age that has lost hope in the human realm, 'that any human initiative can make a meaningful difference' (p. 161).

All well and good. And the book provides an engaging exegesis, even if it is overly long, approaching 400 pages. The problem is that Boysen sets up a rather ahistorical and binary treatment, where religious, romantic and spiritualistic approaches attempting to 'reenchant the world' of modernity are counterposed to the allegedly rationalist and secular materialism of the Enlightenment, with its highest development in the theorising and revolutionary project of Karl Marx. For the timeless anti-modern and anti-human reactionaries, up to and including today's new materialists, the problem is that the modern world lacks meaning; there is no metaphysical spice to add to the bland literality of being; 'meaning' is 'meaningless', as it is only secular and thus [the world is] stripped of its former magic, unity, mystery, transcendence, and religious content' (p. 111).

As a consequence of this dehistoricised binary, I think there is a problem in the interpretation of the contemporary new materialisms. Boysen argues that present attempts to move outside a modern ontology fall into 'the pitfalls of abstractly believing that reality and materiality are immediately and

unproblematically accessible' (p. xv); apparently, they call for a 'reconnection with and immediate access to reality' (p. 21); and 'an immediate present cleansed of past and history and in which everything can be accessed directly and immediately' (p. 43). There is allegedly a 'forceful craving for reality' and 'authenticity' seemingly denied by the modern episteme of representation, reduction and abstraction (p. 30). In this reading, the new materialists 'especially oppose the post-structuralist idea of human reality as semiotic and linguistic' (p. 79) and give 'voice to a passionate yearning to escape the prison house of language' (p. 80). There is a desire to flee the phenomenological entrapment of the human, the condition of 'semiophobia', i.e., a fear of the semiotic human condition (p. 76).

Yet this makes little sense considering the stress that theorists like Bruno Latour put upon the importance of widely distributed agential mediation (2005) and Karen Barad's stress on the importance of the apparatus in the production of reality (2007). Even for Meillassoux's critique of Kantian 'correlationism' (pp. 31, 84, 204), the assumption that the mind/world limit is imprisoning in no way implies unproblematic access to the 'great outdoors' but rather affirms the necessity of contingency and unknowability (Meillassoux 2009). It is a shame that contemporary theory is misread in this way, as it is precisely the impossibility of gaining access to the world beyond this one that is the key aspect of new materialist thought today. It is not unmediated access to a world beyond modernity but rather the impossibility of access that is the key attribute that enables postmodern imaginaries to constitute a future after the end of the world of modernity.

This also means that Boysen is wrong to think of the new materialisms as merely defeatist or politically quietist. The fact that the future is open and is necessarily unknowable is understood here as nihilist, apparently: 'OOO [Object-Oriented Ontology]'s hipster aesthetic of nihilism (untouchable withdrawal) leaves us with little to hope for' (p. 261). The fact that there is nothing to hope for is, in fact, the reason why hope can still exist once it has shed its modernist telos. 'The end of modernity is not the end of everything' is the new materialist promise. Unfortunately, Boysen does not locate contemporary thought as a response to the end of the liberal telos or a modernist future imaginary. In part, this is because he is a firm advocate of modernity's continued viability, in fact, of the urgent necessity of the modernist project. So much so that he argues, 'The investments required to prevent climate catastrophe from happening are within range and pose no serious economic difficulties' (p. 3). Apparently, 'the technological developments and the creation of wealth have made it feasible to actualize human freedom like never before' (p. 39).

Boysen posits his own rationalist and human-centred alternative, doubling down on anthropocentrism and even the possibility of 'an end to capitalism' (2025: 350). He argues, 'Pace the new materialisms, we should appreciate that humans do in principle have the freedom to choose another future for themselves' (p. xviii). However, the human-centred imaginary of Boysen shares much of the 'magical materialism' he condemns in contemporary

critical approaches. Evading any practical questions of either how real human democracy comes to displace capitalism or how this radical freedom can overcome the catastrophic impacts of capitalism, colonialism and climate change, Boysen merely asserts, against posthuman and inhuman imaginaries, that 'only humans freely create their own human reality in which to live' (2025: 338).

In this reading, the Marxist 'historical materialist' alternative to speculative new materialisms is equally speculative, grounded not in any specific goals or policies but in imaginary abstractions of processes of 'common self-determination' (ibid.: 335). The closures of the Anthropocene are countered by the coming communist utopia, whereby 'Democratic individualism rests on the cultivation and continued opening of an alien horizon of possibility' (p. 349). The open-ended possibility that Boysen grounds in the Marxist view of a human nature—seemingly freed from material grounding and abstractly self-determining (p. 325)—mirrors that which the new materialists find in the world of processual becoming beyond appropriation by modernist categories of representation. Marxism (in this telling) is so much '*the exact opposite*' (p. 350) of new materialism that it ends up being practically indistinguishable.

With the exhaustion of modernist imaginaries of progress, it seems that the only possibility of imagining a future after the 'end of the world', is through critical speculative openness. After the end of modernist futures, critical theory today—whether of the 'old' or 'new' varieties of materialism—provides other 'futures' and other 'possible worlds', but ones without content, without goals: futures of process and of 'self-worlding' without end. For these 'futures' to enable new forms of governance and regulation, for this world not to be all that there is, the price is the exchange of world for worldlessness (Végső 2020), the exchange of knowing for non-knowing, of certainty for uncertainty, of causality for entanglement, and of being for becoming.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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