

THE ONTOLOGICAL PRISON

New Materialisms and their Dead Ends

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Abstract: The emergence of the New Materialisms from a critique of the cultural or linguistic turn in social theory and its inability to adequately deal with questions of matter seems to be quite similar to the starting point of historical Materialism. But, in its reformulation of such crucial concepts and relations as subject-object- or nature-culture divisions (or, in that case, non-divisions), as well as its emphasis on the concept of contingent assemblages as an ontology of the emergence of matter and things, it is no longer human praxis which is being highlighted but the event (Ereignis) of materialization of non-human/human assemblages. Thus, it is only the contingency of matter which is leading to changes. Hence, the ontology of New Materialisms is deeply problematic.

Therefore, the paper aims to provide a critique of the main concepts of the New Materialisms by means of Marxian approaches. The theses are, first, that the New Materialisms de-socialize things through de-socializing categories and concepts; second, that they can be assumed to represent more of an "ontological turn" than a "material turn," which has serious epistemological consequences; and, third, they are mirroring in their negation of the subject the methodological individualism of neoliberal theory because both approaches define a non-society of super-individual processes, a kind of spontaneous order which cannot be controlled by humans. In order to substantiate these assumptions the paper first traces back the main categories of New Materialisms, then takes a deeper look at the subject-object- and the nature-culture relation before relating it to neoliberal society. Finally, the ontology of open-endedness and contingency will be criticized as an ontological apologia of what is.

Keywords: New Materialisms, the ontological turn, Marxism, critical theory

The so-called New Materialisms emerged, especially, from a critique of the cultural or linguistic turn in social theory and its inability to adequately deal with questions of matter. The origins of New Materialism are very diverse, but are nevertheless deeply rooted in feminist theory¹ and feminist science studies² as well as in a re-reading of theorists like Spinoza, Bergson, or Deleuze. Its aim is to give answers to “the most fundamental questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans within a material world,”³ thus all of the New Materialisms focus on the emergence and agency of matter in assemblages with or without human beings. In a truly radical and – for critical theory – challenging way, the New Materialisms try to rethink questions of “how matter comes to matter”⁴ as well as how major divisions in science and society (like the subject-object division) are emerging out of specific constellations of embodied and embedded humans and scientific-technologist apparatuses. Out of this rethink of the mattering of matter and the emerging of divisions various approaches have been derived that tackle a wide range of problems ranging from epistemology to the emergence of social entities. The starting points of the New Materialisms seem quite similar to those of historical materialism – for instance, its critique of certain kinds of idealistic philosophy that single out the human spirit as the primary factor in the world’s constitution – but the conclusions reached by the New Materialisms are quite different.

Surprisingly enough, while there are approaches trying to bring matter back in, there is little discussion of New Materialism’s own relation to historical materialism even though the influence of Marx is recognized through the mediation of structural Marxism⁵ – that

¹ Cf. Myra Hird, “Feminist Matters: New Materialist Considerations of Sexual Difference,” *Feminist Theory* 5 (2004), no. 2, pp. 223–232; Nina Lykke, “The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism,” *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 18 (2010), no. 2, pp. 131–136.

² Cf. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988), no. 3, pp. 575–599; Karen Barad, “Agential Realism: How Material-Discursive Practices Matter,” in Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 132–188.

³ Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1–43, here 3.

⁴ Karen Barad, “Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialization of Reality,” in Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, pp. 189–222, here 191 and 207.

⁵ One exception is Hanna Meißner, who discusses Marx and the possibilities of connecting his insights with Foucault, Butler, and Barad. However, her focus is not to tackle all the problems and differences of Marxian/historical materialist approaches but to rethink the possibilities of a critique of society. I will try to problematize one crucial point in the section on epistemological consequences (Hanna Meißner, “Feministische Gesellschaftskritik als onto-epistemo-logisches Projekt,” in Corinna Bath et al. [ed.], *Geschlechter Interferenzen: Wissensformen – Subjektivierungsweisen – Materialisierungen* [Berlin: LIT, 2013], pp. 163–208).

is, early Althusser⁶ and those influenced by him. Hence, neither is there substantial discussion of Marxian critiques of idealism and philosophical materialism. The theoretical tradition of the New Materialisms can be traced back to post-structuralism, vitalism (for instance Bergson), Deleuze/Guattari, and Heidegger.⁷ The major motives in developing a new perspective on matter are to overcome “dualisms of object/subject, knower-known, nature-culture, and word-world,”⁸ thus to understand constellations of matter and humans as assemblage as contingent and open-ended ontological processes in which matter has its own agency.⁹ According to such assumptions it is no longer human praxis, as in historical materialism, but the event (*Ereignis*) of materialization of assemblages which is highlighted.¹⁰ Thus, New Materialism tries to provide a novel approach to social ontology and it could be said, though it would be a kind of exaggeration, that in this new approach coincidence becomes the motor of history in the last instance.

In this article, my aim is to provide a critique of the main concepts of the New Materialisms by means of Marxian approaches as developed by the Frankfurt School. My theses are first that the New Materialisms de-socialize things through de-socializing categories and concepts; second, that they can be assumed to be more an “ontological turn” than a “material turn,”¹¹ which has serious epistemological consequences; and, third, in their negation of the subject they mirror what neoliberal theory accomplishes through methodological individualism, defining a non-society of super-individual processes, a kind of a spontaneous order which cannot be controlled by humans. In order to substantiate these assumptions, I will first trace the main categories of the New Materialisms and then take a deeper look at the subject-object and nature-culture relation before finally relating it to historical materialism. To sharpen my argument and, indeed, provoke the readers of this article, the ontological turn will be criticized as being, in general, a dead end for emancipation.

⁶ “Early” Althusser mainly refers to those of his works that bore directly on Marx and on the state. The late Althusser turned away from that kind of structuralism. His late theory is based on a specific concept of contingency that is very close to the New Materialisms. See the next footnote.

⁷ Althusser, for instance, included Heidegger in what he called the “underground current of materialism of the encounter” (Louis Althusser, “The underground Current of the Materialism of Encounter,” in Francois Matheron and Oliver Corpet [eds.], *Philosophy of the Encounter Later Writings, 1978–87* [Verso: London New York, 2006], pp. 163–207).

⁸ Barad, “Agential Realism,” p. 147.

⁹ This is, obviously, according to Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* [Oxford: University Press, 2005], p. 63f).

¹⁰ Cf. Andreas Folkers, “Von der Praxis zum Ereignis,” in Tobias Goll, Daniel Keil, and Thomas Telios (eds.), *Critical Matter: Diskussionen eines neuen Materialismus* (Münster: Edition Assemblage, 2013), pp. 16–33.

¹¹ See, for instance, Steve Woolgar and Javier Lezaun, “The wrong bin bag: A turn to ontology in science and technology studies?” *Social Studies of Science* 43 (2013), no. 3, pp. 321–340.

The Foundations of the New Materialisms

It is hardly possible to trace all the trajectories of the various concepts that merged into New Materialism. Thus, and to be clear, there is not one New Materialism but many different approaches. Some main principles, however, can be found which I believe play a constitutive role. If I had to draw a rough historical line of its emergence, it would start with a criticizing of the economism in Marxism, which was identified with a type of structuralism, the critique of which led to post-structuralism, post-modern theory, linguistic, and discourse theories, and which finally led to the new material (or ontological, as I would say) turn that brought the New Materialisms to life. In spite of the multiple genealogies underlying the New Materialisms, one thing that the various New Materialisms share is a re-reading of minor (non-dominant) traditions in philosophy (such as Spinoza or Bergson, sometimes reaching back to Epicurus). Nevertheless, there is a varying range of genealogies in which four central points can be summarized. These four points include: first, the recognition of matter as active, not just passive and inert; second, the dissolution of the nature-culture dichotomy and the conceptualization of the relations between matter and non-matter in other than causal or mediated relations; third, the rejection of the subject-object dichotomy, negating this fundamental tenet of Cartesian thought; and, fourth, the consideration of history not as linear or causal but as contingent, occasional, an emergence of assemblages of singular unities. These four points, which are deeply intertwined, are, hence, the theoretical foundation of all New Materialist approaches.

As Assemblages Emerge – What’s the Matter?

Because the crucial theorems of the New Materialisms are heavily interwoven, it is hardly possible to illustrate them in a linear way. In the following section, they will therefore be presented both as a whole and as distinct conceptualizations. One important thesis of the New Materialisms, and thus to give justification for starting at this point, is the new position assigned to matter or non-human objects in Science and Technology Studies. As Latour states, “we should [...] find a place in a new social theory for the non-human masses that beg us for understanding.”¹² The new role of “objects” is to be found in highlighting their own agency, which changes the relations in science to the objects of knowledge. Haraway, further, questions the possibility of pure epistemological objectivity, emphasizing partial perspectives, limited locations, and situated knowledge.¹³ Objects become actors herein. With the notion of an “apparatus of bodily production,” Haraway emphasizes the object of knowledge as a “material-semiotic actor”¹⁴ which is conceived

¹² Bruno Latour, “Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts,” in Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law (eds.), *Shaping Technology / Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), pp. 151–180, here 153.

¹³ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 595.

as a “meaning-generating part of the apparatus.”¹⁵ Referring to Latour, she tries to reject nature or society as transcendental categories and instead takes a partial view of actor-actant relations without reproducing binary oppositions such as culture-nature, science-society, and others.¹⁶ Objects only become objects in networks of material-semiotic interaction. Subsequently, the New Materialisms radicalized the concept of matter as an actor with its own agency. Especially Jane Bennett’s vitalist theory is centered on “thing-power”:¹⁷ “The curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”¹⁸ For Barad, in contrast to Bennett, “matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency.”¹⁹ In the concept of matter’s own agency and the focus on the network in which objects become objects, or in which matter becomes matter, matter itself is not passive, but rather produces its own historicity without a need for human beings. Matter “does not require the mark of an external force like culture or history to complete it. Matter is always ongoing historicity.”²⁰ Overall, the focus is on the becoming of matter, understood neither as passive and inert stuff nor as merely produced by humans but as processes of different agents or agential forces, where the relata do not precede their relations. Haraway especially hit an important point in her rethinking of scientific modes of knowledge and in grasping those modes as apparatuses of bodily production, where boundaries are emerging and bodies are produced through practices of knowledge-production. But in rejecting the dualisms of hegemonic sciences, it appears to me that the New Materialisms too strictly identify knowledge production with techno-scientific practices, and that this leads to certain problems when the critique of science is transferred to a critique of society as a whole (and not just of society as a product of scientific knowledge production).

The Subject-Object and Nature-Culture Division and the Gathering of Things

Perhaps the lastly mentioned problem will be uncovered by taking a deeper look at the rejection of some dualisms, namely the nature-culture division as well as the subject-object division. The argument is, very briefly, that in conceptualizing culture and nature as well as subject and object as transcendental binaries, all potentials of acting are placed on the side of humans and thus this blinds us to the agency of matter (see, for example, Haraway 1995). It is argued that those binaries are disappearing outside

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Cf. Donna Haraway, *Monströse Versprechen: Coyote-Geschichten zu Feminismus und Technowissenschaft* (Hamburg: Argument-Verlag, 1995), pp. 186f.

¹⁷ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 4f.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Barad, “Agential Realism,” p. 151.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

of the premises of enlightenment and modernity. Instead of reproducing such binaries, the perspective of the New Materialisms is to emphasize the crucial role of matter and non-human actors in the production of knowledge as well as the role of relations between humans and non-humans. The division of nature-culture or subject-object is losing its sense, replaced by a flat ontology that does not privilege one part of being over another.

The problem is that in identifying those divisions as binary dichotomies, derived especially from the Cartesian subject and the philosophy of enlightenment in general,²¹ the understanding of matter as an agency and a force dissolve those binaries in an ontological way. It does not ask about the social foundation of Cartesian thoughts but rather contrasts them with ontological assumptions about the being and becoming of matter and its knowledge. This is quite contrary to the procedure of sublation (*Aufhebung*) in a Hegelian way; thus, it is more a going back to before the philosophy of the Enlightenment²² in order to conceptualize the production of matter-human networks as a fundamental structure of being. For the New Materialists, there is no longer any division between the cognitive subject and the passive object; rather, there is a network that emerged contingently and which is in all parts seen as productive. Those networks, hence, are taken as contingent (networks of) singular entities and grasped as assemblages.²³ Assemblages can be understood as gatherings of things (from atoms to human beings) – concrete, singular, and contingent singularities – which have “neither subject nor object.”²⁴ The relations of the parts of such an assemblage are grasped as: “Relations

²¹ In fact, the Cartesian model of perception is crucial as one starting point of the New Materialisms (cf. Barad, “Agential Realism,” and Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*), the critique of which is entangled with an anti-Hegelian and anti-Marxian approach; it is not surprising then that they do not recognize the critique of Descartes formulated, for instance, by Critical Theory: “The inability to grasp in thought the unity of theory and practice and the limitation of the concept of necessity to inevitable events are both due, from the viewpoint of theory of knowledge, to the Cartesian dualism of thought and being. That dualism is congenial both to nature and to bourgeois society in so far as the latter resembles a natural mechanism.” (Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell and others [New York: Continuum, 2002], pp. 181–243, here 231.)

²² This is indicated in several expressions. First, in the references to authors of anti- or irrationalist traditions in philosophy and, second, in identifying the criticized binaries of culture-nature or subject-object with enlightenment and modernity (e.g., Haraway, *Monströse Versprechen*) and to identify those with Western and male domination. That the critics of the Enlightenment are very important towards understanding mechanisms of power, domination, and expropriation cannot be contested, but to grasp it in that way of identification runs the risk of returning to some kind of pre-Enlightenment philosophy because, in criticizing nature-culture and subject-object divisions as binaries, they become hypostasized as some kind of wrong epistemology without reconnecting those dualist reflections to the societal conditions in which they are founded.

²³ Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia 2* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987), pp. 4f; Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006).

²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 3.

of exteriority. These relations imply, first of all, that a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different.”²⁵ Assemblages can each be taken as a singular multiplicity that has to be separately focused on their becoming. This way of thinking shall avoid both totalities and essences, so it takes multiplicities as contingent sets of things gathering without subject or object; a multiplicity has “only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature.”²⁶ So it refuses to think in generalizing categories and it states that the relations between the singular parts of a multiplicity are not relations of mediation, but are exterior relations²⁷ or relations of “intra-action,”²⁸ that is, “relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions. Crucially, then, intra-actions enact agential separability – the condition of exteriority-within-phenomena.”²⁹ The point is to construe a concept of phenomena or multiplicities that emerge contingent in each specific form with specific boundaries. Each assemblage emerging out of intra-active agency is also to be grasped as a phenomenon of emerging cuts and boundaries, of excluding agents or actants from the assembling. Taking assemblages as apparatuses of bodily production, the emerging bodies are specific ones in excluding other “things” from being part of that body.

Contingency and History

Notwithstanding the creation of boundaries, the main feature of assemblages still is contingency, which has a deep impact on the understanding of history, that “history of contingency.”³⁰ It refers to the concept of *clinamen*, the name which Lucretius gave to the swerving of atoms, in which one contingent deviation causes impacts.³¹ The second point is that we see here a fundamental ontological assumption similar to the assumptions of classical ontology, that the world is not only actual but also virtual, which means that there are potentials and possibilities which may not become actual in emergent assemblages. We have here a difference between being and existence, in which being, despite all contingency, structures the emergence of actual existence. DeLanda presents this as the difference between “individual singularities” of existent assemblages and “universal singularities,”³² the latter of which are described in Deleuzian terms as “equivalent of

²⁵ DeLanda, *New Philosophy*, p. 10.

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 8.

²⁷ DeLanda, *New Philosophy*.

²⁸ Barad, “Agential Realism.”

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Vorwort zur italienischen Ausgabe,” in *Tausend Plateaus: Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie*, (Berlin: Merve, 1992), pp. i-iii, here p. ii. My translation.

³¹ Cf. Folkers, “Von der Praxis”; Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 361; Althusser, „The underground Current.”

³² DeLanda, *New Philosophy*, pp. 30f.

body-plan.”³³ Contingency becomes restricted by being itself, which is structuring the possibilities of emerging assemblages in general. It is not by accident that this reminds one of Heidegger: “Being is the enabling-favoring, the “may be” [*das “Mög-liche”*]. As the element, being is the “quiet power” of the favoring-enabling that is, of the possible.”³⁴ This is “being itself.”³⁵ The New Materialisms are following Heidegger, albeit not explicitly. They also follow Heidegger in focusing on the emergence of existence, the becoming of assemblages. Crucial here is the notion of the event (“*Ereignis*”), which implies contingency as well as the exterior relations of the parts of emerging multiplicities. If there is neither subject nor object, the coming of being into existence means that all parts equally produce the emerging existence, whatever the assemblage will be: a forest, a spider web, a city, society. All parts are producing the assemblage, but they are not mediated through it. If, for instance, society is not a category and reality of mediation any longer, it is not structuring the relations of things and humans either. In addition, the already-mentioned term of “gathering” is important here since it reveals the sometimes-hidden role of Heidegger in the concept of assemblages. Latour, for instance, is referring directly to Heidegger’s concept of gathering and the “thinging of things” when he develops the idea that every thing is, at the same time, a gathering.³⁶

The De-Socializing of Things and Relations and a Hidden Problem

According to such concepts of assemblages and gatherings of things, the social itself is conceived of in new ways. In emphasizing the agency of matter, the concept of society is thus questioned at its core. In redefining the social, the concept of society is grasped as one of the above-mentioned transcendentals to be overcome. Latour underlines this in his aim to renew social theory. “There is no way to succeed in renewing social theory as long as the beach has not been cleared and the ill-fated notion of society entirely dissolved.”³⁷ Hence, society is dissolved into assemblages and gatherings, and the dualisms of subject-object and nature-culture are therefore dissolved into the ontological foundations of becoming things and gatherings. I would grasp this as a de-socializing of things and relations, because the fundamental structuring of relations through society is negated in reifying the difference of the social and societal in order to redefine society as just being the contingent outcome of the “thinging” of things. The specific social form of things and relations is negated as well. To make this clear with an example: the

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” in Martin Heidegger *Heidegger: Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 239–276, here 243.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Bruno Latour, “Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), no. 2, pp. 225–248, here 235.

³⁷ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 164.

New Materialisms' emphasis on the ontological becoming of assemblages reveals the difference between their approach to becoming and the concept of becoming in historical materialism. In historical materialism, becoming is not taken to be ontological but instead emphasizes the movement of contradictory elements (like nature-culture or subject-object) in constituting those contradictions through human praxis. The crucial point is that the relations which humans have to take on to reproduce themselves under the conditions of capital are becoming objectified and reified forms that seem to be external to the individuals. Humans are dominated by their own social relations that also determine their immediate perception of reality. Otherwise, those objectified and reified relations – social forms – have to be reproduced themselves through the practice they dominate. Those social forms include the value-form, the political form, and law with its specific form of the subject. Historical materialism, hence, deciphers these forms as societal relations. This is also the place where mediation becomes crucial in Critical Theory. Mediation does not involve establishing strict binaries; rather, it defines how societal relations are congealed objectifications of human praxis working through contradictions. Thus, things, relations, and humans-as-subjects are taking a specific societal form that is negated when one falls back on an ontological concept of becoming and rejects the concept of mediation. With the rejection of mediation, specifically societal (as opposed to “social”)³⁸ structuring cannot be seen anymore. This is what I call the de-socialization of things and relations.

A further problem is that understanding being as an event in a Heideggerian sense means positing a mystic dimension of the event, as a presencing of being (“*Wesung des Seyns*”³⁹), which also implies a closure of history: the open-ended processing of history in that sense does not recognize historical development because history is nothing more than a succession of events.⁴⁰

The undiscussed⁴¹ and therefore unconscious tradition of Heidegger on the ontological path of the New Materialisms poses yet another problem, because the concept of event has been developed in a hidden political context that was structured by a strict Manichaeism in the history of being (between good being and evil existence). In 1938 Heidegger developed this in thinking about National Socialism, where he took that strict

³⁸ This difference is very important, because the New Materialisms are surely thinking about the social but in a way which negates society. So the concept of societal relations has to be distinct from the concept of social relations. That is because for the New Materialisms something can be social, but without society.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2003), p. 7.

⁴⁰ Cf. Rüdiger H. Rimpler, *Prozessualität und Performativität in Heideggers “Beiträgen zur Philosophie”: Zur Zeitigung von Sinn im Gedanken an die Wesung* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008), p. 20.

⁴¹ To be clear, Heidegger is discussed sometimes, but the specific problem that I want to tackle stays undiscussed.

difference to proclaim a decision that should not be made between war or peace, democracy, or authority, but: reflection and the search for the beginning event of being or the delusion of the final humanization of the uprooted human being.⁴² The strict differentiation between a primal being and modern society, which Heidegger states here, is not only the basis for his antisemitism, but it also connects the concept of the event with the historically concrete phenomenon of National Socialism. This is so in a two folded manner: first, the event appears in a philosophical sense as another beginning (Greek philosophy was, for Heidegger, the first beginning) made by the Germans – as liberation, which has to be thought as “*Gründung in das ungehobene Wesen, die ihre Weisung aus der bodenständigen Nähe zum Ursprung [empfängt – DK]*.”⁴³ Second, the event appears in a political sense, as Heidegger adopted National Socialism as this event of another beginning;⁴⁴ this was thought as having the potential to reject the mere appearance of liberation, which would be a path to the disrooted outland.⁴⁵ The connection of foundational ontological considerations with National Socialism in Heidegger’s work does not make the ontology of the New Materialisms in and of itself National Socialist, but this connection cannot be evaded simply by not discussing it. This is, moreover, the real underground current of the ontological tradition, in its assuming (whether explicitly or not) a somehow primal being which is then, however, meaningful. This is echoed, for instance, in Barad’s term of a “primary ontological unit”⁴⁶ and it is also the source of the anti- or posthumanist approach, in understanding the binaries as “enlightenment values”⁴⁷ that have to be rejected in order to negate those binaries. Adorno’s critique of ontological jargon can also be applied here:

⁴² Peter Trawny, *Heidegger und der Mythos der jüdischen Weltverschwörung* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2015), p. 24; Martin Heidegger “Überlegungen IX,” in Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 95, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2015), pp. 191f.

⁴³ Heidegger, cited by Trawny, *Heidegger und der Mythos*, p. 76. The text is hard to translate, but it means that the second beginning of philosophy as liberation is a foundation in the unexposed essence, which receives its directive from the rooted-to-the-soil nearness to the origin.

⁴⁴ Cf. Dirk Pilz, “Ein anderer Anfang: Die Schwarzen Hefte von Martin Heidegger,” *Frankfurt Rundschau* Mar. 16, 2014 (online at <http://www.fr-online.de/literatur/die--schwarzen-hefte--von-martin-heidegger-ein-anderer-anfang,1472266,26569072.html> [accessed Oct. 29, 2015]).

⁴⁵ The notion of the “disrooted outland” or the “uprooted human being” is nothing but an anti-Semitic code in this context. It contrasts a natural nation bounded by blood and soil to unbound cosmopolitanism, which is thought as decomposing the natural order. The code functions so well that there is no need to mention Jews explicitly. On antisemitism cf. Detlev Claussen, *Grenzen der Aufklärung: Die gesellschaftliche Genese des modernen Antisemitismus, Erweiterte Neuausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2005).

⁴⁶ Barad, “Agential Realism,” p. 139.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Whatever praises itself for reaching behind the concepts of reflection – subject and object – in order to grasp something substantial, does nothing but reify the irresolvability of the concepts of reflection. It reifies the impossibility of reducing one into the other, into the in-itself. This is the standard philosophical form of underhanded activity, which thereupon occurs constantly in the jargon. It vindicates without authority and without theology, maintaining that what is of essence is real, and, by the same token, that the existent is essential, meaningful, and justified.⁴⁸

In turning the concept of becoming, which is also crucial in historical materialism, into the ontological concept of event, the concept of becoming itself is thus irrationalized. A critical concept is hence turned into an affirmative one because being is affirmed as primal to all emerging events of gatherings. Haug compares this form of turning concepts into irrationality with pre-fascist incorporations of moments of materialist theory in the praxis of stabilizing capitalist domination.⁴⁹ It is a form of materialist legitimation and affirmation of the existent world.

Epistemological Consequences: The Ontological Turn

By going back behind the concepts of reflection, the question of the possibility of knowledge and perception of the world is also given over to new discussions. Therein a shift from epistemology to ontology can be recognized, which is why I would grasp the turn provided by the New Materialisms as being rather more ontological than material. “It is an effort to circumvent epistemology and its attendant language of representation in favour of an approach that addresses itself more directly to the composition of the world.”⁵⁰ Crucial are the attempts to overcome dialectics, especially the specific, perceived Hegelian tradition, in order to re-establish ontological models of cognition. The theory of assemblages, or multiplicities, was created “precisely in order to escape the abstract opposition between the multiple and the one, to escape dialectics.”⁵¹ In this case, dialectical thinking is assumed to be producing organic totalities, where in every part the whole is essentially existent. In general, dialectics are equalized with models of organic totalities that have to be overcome.⁵² According to this, Marxian and Hegelian

⁴⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 121.

⁴⁹ Wolfgang Fritz Haug, “Mensch, Natur und Technik im Hightech-Kapitalismus, Teil 1,” *Das Argument* 58 (2015), no. 1 (313), pp. 315–337, here 334.

⁵⁰ Steve Woolgar and Javier Lezaun, “The Wrong Bin Bag: A Turn to Ontology in Science and Technology Studies?” *Social Studies of Science* 43 (2013), no. 3, pp. 321–340, here 321f.

⁵¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 33.

⁵² Cf. Graham Harman, “DeLanda’s Ontology: Assemblage and Realism,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 41 (2008), no. 3, pp. 367–383, here 371.

Dialectics are seen as focusing on a concept of synthesis which has been replaced by other models.⁵³ And, third, dialectics are seen as reproducing dualisms, which the New Materialisms are arguing against.⁵⁴ Before criticizing this reductive understanding of dialectics, I will try to summarize the consequences of this for epistemological questions.

At least three main theoretical considerations ground the questions of knowledge: first, the agency of matter, the generativity of things, which “act” in networks; second, the going back behind the nature-culture divide; and, third, bypassing the subject-object division. By refusing the concept of mediation, the relations between the parts of the emerging assemblages must be generating the possibility of knowledge in some other way. For Barad it is a “feature of the world”:

But in my agential realist account, intelligibility is an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation. It is not a human-dependent characteristic but a feature of the world in its differential becoming. The world articulates itself differently.⁵⁵

Every social structure is, hence, a contingent result of this emergence of articulations, but it has also abandoned any thinking about the possibilities of knowledge. Moreover, the possibilities of knowledge are bound to a “plane of immanence” (Deleuze and Guattari) which has to be understood as a monist concept of contingent becoming, as being which determines the knowledge of being through being.⁵⁶ This is based on two assumptions: first, the Bergsonian concept of intuition⁵⁷ in which a mystical real process of a unity of matter and spirit is developed⁵⁸ and, second, Heidegger’s considerations that human beings have to dwell in “the nearness of being.”⁵⁹ In consequence, it is not just repeating the radical de-socialization that Adorno criticized – intuition as a form of abstract negation of mediation – which falls into the cult of a pure actualism and praises,

⁵³ Cf. Manuel DeLanda, “Interview with Manuel DeLanda,” in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (eds.), *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2010) (online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/11515701.0001.001/1:4.2/--new-materialism-interview-s-cartographies?rgn=div2;view=fulltext> [accessed May 17, 2017]), pp. 38–47, here 39.

⁵⁴ Cf. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, “The Transversality of New Materialism,” in Dolphijn and van der Tuin (eds.), *New Materialism* (online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/11515701.001.001/1:5.2/--new-materialism-interviews-cartographies?rgn=div2;view=fulltext> [accessed May 17, 2017]), pp. 93–114, here 97f.

⁵⁵ Barad, “Agential Realism,” p. 149.

⁵⁶ Cf. Elmar Flatschart, “Matter that really matters? New Materialism und kritisch-dialektische Theorie,” in Goll, Keil, and Telios (eds.), *Critical Matter*, pp. 96–112, here 104.

⁵⁷ On the influence of Bergson on Deleuze/Guattari and New Materialism cf. Elizabeth Grosz, “Bergson, Deleuze and the Becoming of Unbecoming,” *parallax* 11 (2005), no. 2, pp. 4–13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” p. 261.

at the least, conformism⁶⁰ but also the reestablishment of some kind of nativeness, of a pure immediateness. “The human being is not the lord of beings. The human being is the shepherd of being. [...] The human being is the neighbor of being.”⁶¹ Insofar as the intelligibility of the world – or of being – is a feature of the becoming of the world, all disturbing distractions (like dialectics) have to be abolished to get to the unmediated dwelling in being. The world in its articulation is no longer a place of conscious changes but only some contingent plane of mythological events. “Philosophical banality is generated when that magical participation in the absolute is ascribed to the general concept — a participation which puts the lie to that concept’s conceivability.”⁶²

Nature – Second Nature: The Loss of Labor and Spontaneity

The ontological hypostasis of being, although and because of the centrality of becoming, results in a reabsorption of the subject into nature. Going back in this specific way to a moment before the nature-culture division means obliterating the specific sociality of all relations in order to establish some primal figures. If “matter is worlding in its materiality”⁶³ and all differences are contingently emerging through this worlding, then there is an undivided nativeness which also affects the differentiation of nature and culture. Culture is no longer understood as an achievement resulting from the carving out of the compulsion of nature; it is merely a result of the blind processes of being. Thus worlding matter is equated with nature: “What I am calling vital materiality or vibrant matter is akin to what is expressed in one of the many historical senses of the word nature.”⁶⁴ Nature itself becomes a “continuous stream of occurrence.”⁶⁵ Humanity, thus, is conceptualized as “an embodied humanity enveloped in nature, rather than as external to inert stuff it dominates.”⁶⁶ This is situated before all societal forms, which just become the outcome of contingency or nature. This does not mean that the social-culture comes after nature for these authors; rather, the social appears as a kind of naturalization of societal forms. This can be recognized as a reflection of Spinozian substance, an extension of *natura naturans*.

In such reduction, crucial categories of theoretical reflection are abandoned, among them the concept of labor. What we have here is a materialism that radically abstracts the main aspects of historical materialism by reducing substance to extension – it neglects

⁶⁰ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, “Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie,” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), p. 54.

⁶¹ Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” pp. 260f.

⁶² Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, p. 51.

⁶³ Barad, “Agential Realism,” p. 181.

⁶⁴ Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 117.

⁶⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, quoted in *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Diana Coole, “The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh,” in Coole and Frost (eds.) *New Materialisms*, pp. 92–115, here 113.

the subjective-active side of materialism.⁶⁷ According to Adorno, when reductions are made in order to overcome the culture-nature division, subjectivity becomes nothing more than receptivity; all spontaneity (in a Kantian sense) or what appears as work/labor in Hegelian philosophy, is dispensed with.⁶⁸ As a result of such omissions, the New Materialisms disregard the concept of second nature and its consequences. Society, hence, disappears in New Materialist theories as does historical materialism's attempt to grasp the relations of humans to nature in terms of mediation, involving concepts like "second nature." The idea of second nature suggests that, in the process of social organization, humans carve themselves out of the constraints of blind processing nature. Yet, at the same time, social organization is construed by people as a continuation of blind coercion within social constraints. Societal praxis condenses into social forms which are confronting human beings as reified nature-like things. So critical theory does not focus on nature as a substance, but rather on the constellation of nature, humans, and society, which produces nature as distinct from societal praxis. Actually, second nature is prior to "first" nature,⁶⁹ because to determine nature as the other of culture it is necessary that the separation between nature and culture be mediated – by second nature. This is the necessary condition for the possibility of grasping the mediated as the other in apparent immediacy. That means, nature – both first and second – appears unmediated, but it is, hence, conceptualized as mediated immediacy.⁷⁰ Taking, for instance, Spinozian substance, as Bennet does, to negate all elements of the specific praxis of human beings is to fall back behind the insight of Marx and Engels, who deciphered Spinoza's substance as "metaphysically travestied nature severed from man."⁷¹ The ontological turn of New Materialism negates, in other words, mediation and reifies the apparent immediacy as an ontological first. In all emphases on becoming, agency, and so forth, New Materialism conceals its incapability of reflecting its own conditions and outcomes as duplication of nature-societal constraints. Adorno suggested that the success of ontology is brought by an ontological need⁷² derived from the curious knot of some kind of nonconformist thinking and its recoiling into conformism; in other words, ontology as a kind of a phil-

⁶⁷ Cf. Winfred Kaminski, *Zur Dialektik von Substanz und Subjekt bei Hegel und Marx* (Frankfurt am Main: Haag und Herchen, 1976), p. 42.

⁶⁸ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ontologie und Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), pp. 142f.

⁶⁹ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Die Idee der Naturgeschichte," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), pp. 345–365.

⁷⁰ Cf. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, "Konstellationen der zweiten Natur: Zur Ideengeschichte und Aktualität der Dialektik der Aufklärung," in Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, *Gesten aus Begriffen: Konstellationen der Kritischen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1997), pp.19–50, here 26.

⁷¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Critique* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), p. 186.

⁷² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 1973), pp. 61f.

osophical conformist rebellion. “The categorial structure that had been uncritically accepted as such, as the skeleton of extant conditions, was confirmed as absolute, and the unreflective immediacy of the method lent itself to any kind of license.”⁷³ Then, as a second moment of the ontological need, ontology is expressed in a body of theory that reflects the real powerlessness of the subject at the present historical moment, and which articulates this in an affirmative philosophy.⁷⁴

Some Short Remarks on the Necessary Critique of the Powerlessness of the Subject – Connections to Neoliberalism

Although Dolphijn and van der Tuin state that New Materialism “is thus not necessarily opposed to the crude or Historical/Marxist materialist tradition” but “carefully ‘worked through’ all these traditions,”⁷⁵ it is hard to find evidence of this “working through.” On the contrary, the arguments of New Materialist authors against dialectics and Marxism/Historical materialism do not appear to be the result of sympathetic, constructive criticism, but rather reproduce common anti-Marxist arguments. Some authors merely mention Marx in passing, as does Bennet when she refers to “Marx’s notion of materiality — economic structures and exchanges that provoke many other events,”⁷⁶ a very simplified view (that emerged from restricting Marx’s Materialism to the preface of the 1859 version of the *Critique of Political Economy*) which fails to grasp the importance of praxis as materiality as developed in the “Theses on Feuerbach” and *The German Ideology*. Others engaged in direct attacks on Marx; DeLanda, for example, wants “to liberate the left from the straitjacket in which Marx’s thought has kept it for 150 years.”⁷⁷ His main argument is that Marx’s theory of value was anthropocentric: “only human labor was a source of value, not steam engines, coal, industrial organization, et cetera.”⁷⁸ The concepts inherent in the “‘mode of production’ do not fit a flat ontology of individuals,”⁷⁹ so DeLanda wants to “create a new political economy” based upon other “redefinitions of the market, like those of Hayek.”⁸⁰ Yes, he is proposing Hayek to overcome Marxian thinking. This is far from being a coincidence, but is instead the logical consequence of abandoning the subject-object problem as well as the culture-nature problem. In negating

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁷⁴ Adorno, *Ontologie und Dialektik*.

⁷⁵ Dolphijn and van der Tuin, “Transversality,” p. 89.

⁷⁶ Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, p. XVI.

⁷⁷ Manuel DeLanda, John Protevi, and Torkild Thanem, “Deleuzian Interrogations: A Conversation with Manuel DeLanda and John Protevi,” *Tamara: Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science* 3 (2005), no. 4, pp. 65–88, here 68.

⁷⁸ DeLanda, “Interview,” p. 42.

⁷⁹ DeLanda, Protevi, and Thanem, “Deleuzian Interrogations,” p. 82.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

mediation in general, in rejecting the asymmetric relations of humans to their conditions of existence in order to establish a flat ontology of symmetric agents in emerging assemblages, in de-socializing all categories, the New Materialisms ontology simply reiterates the real powerlessness of the subject in an affirmative way. And yet the power of things is nothing more than the power of social forms. If this is understood – as it is in historical materialism – as the real rigidification of second nature, its assertion can be read critically as identification with powerlessness, which “reinforce[s] the spell of the second nature.”⁸¹

New Materialism is then a consequent continuation of the postmodern liquidation of the subject, which proposes a conformist theory as the latest trend in radical philosophy. This is mirroring neoliberalism in three ways. First, in negating the subject, it parallels neoliberalist theory, whose methodological individualism also negates the rationalist tradition of philosophy and grasps reason and the attempt to collectively shape history and society as authoritarian. For neoliberal theory, the individual is nothing but a social atom that has to act in conformity to the world it is living in.⁸² Hayek is proposing the concept of a spontaneous order, which emerges out of the assembled actions of social atoms that is quite similar to the concept of assemblage.⁸³ But, according to Zuckermann’s polemic against postmodern theory, the negation of societal praxis and the subject can be described as an ideological form of late capitalism in (post)neoliberal times.⁸⁴ Second, to wrap up human beings in nature-being and all relations that emerge as an outcome of contingent agency of symmetrical actors⁸⁵ is to reproduce and naturalize the real reversal of the social context as produced by societal praxis to its preponderance over the individual subject. It is to disregard the fact that the societal praxis has come to be understood as based in the objective subject, in a social doing which is not aware of itself, which is a *hypokeimenon*.⁸⁶ Third, neoliberal society in its real processing is more and more constituted as an order of competition in which the possibilities of interfering

⁸¹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 68.

⁸² Cf. Gerhard Stapelfeldt, *Neoliberaler Irrationalismus: Aufsätze und Vorträge zur Kritik der ökonomischen Rationalität II*, (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovac, 2012), pp. 349f.

⁸³ Friedrich A. von Hayek, *Recht, Gesetzgebung und Freiheit, vol. I: Regeln und Ordnung* (Landsberg am Lech: Verlag Moderne Industrie, 1986).

⁸⁴ Cf. Moshe Zuckermann, “Ohnmacht als ideologischer Lustgewinn: Kritische Anmerkungen zum Subjektdiskurs der Postmoderne,” in Volker Weiß and Sarah Speck (eds.), *Herrschaftsverhältnisse und Herrschaftsdiskurse: Essays zur dekonstruktivistischen Herausforderung kritischer Gesellschaftstheorie* (Berlin: LIT, 2007), pp. 1–11, here 3.

⁸⁵ On the critique of this moment of flat ontologies, see Haug, “Mensch, Natur und Technik,” pp. 328f.

⁸⁶ Cf. Hans-Jürgen Krahl, *Konstitution und Klassenkampf* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1977), p. 139.

actions are limited through the depoliticization of more and more areas of society, which reinforces its ideological claim to be based on atomized individuals who have to act in ways of voluntary conformism.

Instead of affirming the real powerlessness of the subject, it would be truly radical to renew critical theory in these times of a rising Counter-Enlightenment. There is a spark of truth in the critique of dialectical and Marxian thinking provided by New Materialism that has to be recognized. Dialectical and materialist theory cannot simply combine philosophies of identity with crude economism. Especially the network-theory has some plausibility as a way of accounting for various changes in societal processes.⁸⁷ But if, for instance, the world economy appears as a global net with thicker knots in some regions, it should not be taken for granted that this appearance is also the complete truth. Society should be thought of in another way. The rejection of the dialectical mediation of subject and object is based on a simplified model of dialectics. As shown above, dialectics is equated with totality and dualism, with divisions that the New Materialists are trying to avoid. So the problem is to think of totality as well as the essence-appearance relation in a non-simplified way. This begins by stating that historical Materialism is not just another *prima philosophia* (like ontology always is) because, with the fundamental role of human praxis as constituting and changing both object and subject, “it has become impossible to give any supreme principle as such the final word”.⁸⁸ In consequence, the concept of totality is affected by this, because the final identity posited by Hegel – the absolute spirit as subject-object of history as a self-identical whole – has to be criticized. Adorno develops a critique of Hegel in his attempt to build an anti-systemic theory centered on the concept of constellation. Adorno’s theory helps to avoid construing society as an immanent logical system in which all the parts are an appearance of one essence. It means rather that society should be understood as totality and rupture at the same time. The synthesis of the multiplicity is processed through antagonisms which disrupt the synthesis. This process is the becoming that is at the center of historical materialism, the processing of antagonisms, which are not just the capital-relations; society is a constellation of many processes, reifications, condensations, and institutionalizations, where unity arises out of irreconcilable coercion. Social synthesis has to be grasped as a “negative unity of society in its general bondage.”⁸⁹

⁸⁷ For instance, the transnationalization of capital involves complex processes of de- and reterritorialization of states and economies. In this regard, the concept of networks hits upon a certain point, but if this point is overemphasized, then reterritorializations and their impact on social structures tend to be overlooked.

⁸⁸ Max Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics,” in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, pp. 10–46, here 25.

⁸⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Elemente einer Theorie der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), p. 114. All quotes from German resources are translated by the author.

Open-Endedness as a Dead End: The Ontological Apologia of What Is

*In all its embattled trends, which mutually exclude each other as false versions, ontology is apologetical.*⁹⁰

By returning to irrational ontology, the New Materialisms legitimize the kind of negative unity of society criticized by Adorno. At the same time, the New Materialisms declare the death of Critical Theory and the “old” form of critique associated with it. Latour⁹¹ is providing such a claim in asserting that the old form of critique is a kind of anti-fetishism, which just wants to unmask projections – as in the critique of God as a projection of the human. This assertion itself is reducing the problem of fetishism to a relation between critics and criticized. What is not recognized by Latour is the specific constitution of things in and through human praxis as materialization. For example, commodity fetishism is criticized by Marx not just as a misunderstanding of the true being of the thing as commodity, but as it is constituted in praxis. So when commodities are fetishized, the process of their determination is not correctly understood. What had to be changed, according to Marx, in order to change the form of commodities is human praxis. But Latour understands anti-fetishism simply as a pure attitude of knowing better, which he can declare as obsolete.

Furthermore, the ontological turn is a falling-back into something already criticized by Marx while discussing Lucretius and Epicurus, in which “the atom as the immediate form of the concept is objectified only in immediate absence of concept, this same is true also of the philosophical consciousness of which this principle is the essence.”⁹² According to this, the concepts of matter in New Materialism just remain in absence of concepts for social forms. In de-socializing all categories, the social basis for itself is not open to reflection at all.

The argument in favor of such de-socialization is to declare open-endedness as a way of thinking change and not to stay in some kind of pessimistic totality.⁹³ It may be very attractive to detach change from human practice and to emphasize the contingency of history, making possible a new way of defining change. But this leads to an understanding of change in terms of being, to withdrawing the concept of change from any human influence so that the only thing to be done is waiting for an event. Through negating social mediation, it falls into the void of irrationality and conformism because its apparent open-endedness is nothing but a closure. It is similar to Adorno’s critique

⁹⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 61.

⁹¹ Cf. Latour, “Why has Critique Run Out of Steam?”

⁹² Karl Marx, “Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy”, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 [1927]), pp. 403–509, here 416.

⁹³ Cf. Folkers, “Von der Praxis zum Ereignis.”

of Bergson's concept of the spirit: in abstract negation of its social foundation, it is inextricably held captive by the concealed violence of social reality.⁹⁴ The other way round the New Materialisms' de-socialization of categories, objects, and humans – and the strong influence of irrational philosophy – has to be read through recent forms of socialization. According to Adorno's⁹⁵ insight that Heideggerian ontology – and its success amongst many scholars – not only fits a need but also reflects the real powerlessness of the subject unconsciously, the ontological turn can be reflected as it is found in recent social relations and forms. Crucially, the thinking in assemblages, in contingent emerging clusters of diverse quasi-objects where humans are just one part among many, can be linked back to the neoliberal form of capitalism. De-socializing the categories is somehow echoing Margret Thatcher's claim that "there is no such thing as society," and contingent emerging assemblages are arguably analogous to the neoliberal spontaneous order that emerges out of many actions of unconscious, atomized individuals without being planned or intended by them or by institutions.⁹⁶ As mentioned above, DeLanda refers to Hayek in order to bring down Marx; this is not just a coincidence, but reveals the unconscious trace of neoliberal socialization in New Materialist theory. Beyond the dead-end of contingency there is no possibility of getting out of the false world of exploitation and authority. The powerlessness of the Subject and the superiority of the material world – that is, the quasi-autonomous processes of socialization – are going to be transfigured as something higher in bringing down the subject to a mere institution of registry which just repeats the objective execution of supra-individual processes. On the contrary, Historical Materialism tries to hold onto the idea of a reasonable life in a reasonable world. In so doing, it remains the only materialist theory that points toward its own abolition through changing the material world at which it is directed:

If the material conditions of humankind will come into their own, freeing the reproduction of the human species and the satisfaction of needs from exchange-value and the profit motive, then humankind no longer will live under material coercion, and the fulfillment of materialism will be the end of materialism at the same time.⁹⁷

It is still the task of materialism to contribute to the emancipatory change of the world by ending unreasonable forms of socialization, and every materialism that fails in this task turns into conformism and affirmation.

⁹⁴ Adorno, "Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie," p. 54.

⁹⁵ Adorno, *Ontologie und Dialektik*, p. 143.

⁹⁶ On neoliberalism see Stapelfeldt, *Neoliberaler Irrationalismus*.

⁹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophische Terminologie*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 277.