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Why the Turn to Matter Matters: A Response to Post-Marxist Critiques of New Materialism

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Abstract

Theories of new materialism have gained increasing traction in the social and human sciences in recent decades, as thinkers like Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett have reinvigorated the philosophical interest in topics such as the agency of nonhuman matter, the relational nature of existence, and the limitations of anthropocentric forms of inquiry. However, these theories have faced criticism from post-Marxist critical theorists, who argue that theories of new materialism blunt social and capitalist critique and promote obscurity by flattening the world to a single ontological plane. In this article, I argue that these critiques rely on mischaracterizations of new materialist scholarship and that theories of new materialism can in fact help us re-examine – not reject, as their critics suggest – the role of critique, responsibility, and human politics in the context of the Anthropocene and its unfolding ecological crises.

Keywords New materialism, post-Marxism, critique, nonhuman agency, anthropocene

Introduction

Recent decades have seen a renewed academic interest in the active and emergent capacities of materiality as such, which is increasingly being referred to as a form of new materialism. In its broadest formulations, this new materialism encompasses a wide range of thinkers, including scholars such as Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Jane Bennett, who are all interested in (re-)theorizing the active and emergent agentive capacities of the material world, including but not restricted to, human beings.¹

According to one of the earliest book-length introductions to new materialism, the first usage of the term

can be traced back to the work of philosophers like DeLanda and Braidotti during the 1990s, but it was not until the latter half of the 2000s that the term reached a formal coherence and began circulating more widely (Tuin and Dolphijn 2012, 13). In 2007, one of the very first academic conferences on new materialism was held at University of Illinois (Coole and Frost 2010, x). Today, less than two decades later, thousands of new original academic contributions arguing with, and against, theories of new materialism are published every year.²

What is new materialism? In the humanities and social sciences, it has become “a collective term used to denote a range of perspectives that have in common what has been described as a ‘turn to matter’.” (Fox and Alldred 2016, 4).³ According to Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, the editors of an early and influential anthology on theories of new materialism, one of the core elements of these new theories is the “insistence on describing active processes of materialization of which embodied humans are an integral part, rather than the monotonous repetitions of dead matter from which human subjects are apart.” (Coole & Frost, 9). From this core orientation follows a series of other commitments, including an emphasis on the ontological entanglement of human culture and nonhuman nature, the active agencies of nonhuman things and beings, and a critique of anthropocentric worldviews that privilege human perspectives over all others. In the introduction mentioned above, Dolphijn and Van der Tuin describes the emerging field of new materialism as nothing less than the arrival of a metaphysics that “rewrites thinking as a whole, leaving nothing untouched, redirecting every possible idea according to its new sense of orientation” (13).

While theories of new materialism have grown in popularity in recent years, so has the number of their critics. In what follows, I discuss some of the main critiques that have been leveled against theories of new materialism by post-Marxist critical theorists. More specifically, I address three different, yet related, critiques: First, the charge that new materialism does away with critique and downplays injustices between human beings, such as capitalist structures of domination. Secondly, that new materialism undermines human responsibility and renders us unable to say whether it is the things in themselves or

human beings, who are to blame for the climate and ecological crises. And thirdly, that new materialism's philosophical fabrications about more-than-human agencies are a theoretical distraction, which we cannot afford in a time of emergency that requires immediate and radical political action. I push back against each of these critiques, one at a time, arguing that they rely on misguided representations of new materialist scholarship and overlook the many ways in which 'old' and 'new' forms of materialism can work alongside and support each other in more constructive albeit tensional ways. The overarching argument of this article is that contrary to what its post-Marxist critics suggest, theories of new materialism offer promising intellectual developments around concepts such as critique, responsibility, and agency, which are needed in the broader context of the Anthropocene and its unfolding ecological emergencies. The turn to matter matters, so to speak.

Objection I: What about social critique?

There has been no shortage of dismissive critiques of new materialism in recent years. The critical theorist Paul Rekret ends one of his articles by suggesting that theories of new materialism amount to little more than "jargon" (Rekret 2016, 16), while Benjamin Boysen calls them "self-contradictory" and believes them to be rooted in a feeling of embarrassment about being human (Boysen 2018, 225). The (in)famous Slavoj Žižek even goes so far as to suggest, not without a dose of morbid sarcasm, that the horizontal ontologies of new materialism makes it impossible to ascribe responsibility for the holocaust to human beings (Žižek 2014, 8, footnote). One of the more constructive, yet critical, post-Marxist engagements with new materialism is Susanne Lettow's *Turning the turn: New materialism, historical materialism and critical theory* in this journal, in which she argues that "the distinction between 'old' and 'new' materialism does not hold, and that for political as well as epistemological reasons a critical materialism should renounce any ontological turn to matter itself." (Lettow 2017, 106).

One of Lettow's main concerns in the article, which she shares with other critical theorists, is the risk that new materialism's turn to ontology "undermines the connection between epistemological and social

critique that lies at the heart of critical theory in a broad sense” (Lettow 2017, 107). As a result, she fears that the focus on non-human agencies within new materialism means that “relations of domination, power and difference *within* and *among* human societies are ignored.” (Lettow 2017, 108; my emphasis). This is an entirely legitimate concern. To the extent that theories of new materialism and their interest in nonhuman agencies end up ignoring the domination and suffering that exist among human beings, they are certainly worthy of critique.

However, even though theories of new materialism emphasize the agency and active capacities of nonhuman entities, they do not have to abstain from addressing matters of differential power between human beings. In fact, as suggested by Coole and Frost, for many of its proponents, new materialism arrives both in response to the exhaustion of earlier models of explanation and due to a continued desire to better understand the specific human injustices that follow from portraying nature as inert and passive (Coole & Frost 2010, 3-4). For new materialist thinkers, then, rather than leaving behind humans, the turn to a more agentic materialism is exactly what enables a new and “nondogmatic *reengagement* with political economy, where the nature of, and relationship between, the material details of everyday life and broader geopolitical and socioeconomic structures is being explored afresh. (Coole & Frost 2010, 7, my emphasis). In other words, it is not so much that theories of new materialism ignore inequalities between human subjects, as they are interested in *situating* the hierarchical relations between humans in a broader ontological landscape that include more than human beings. After all, it is from within these complex more-than-human networks, or assemblages, that existing social relations unfold and coalesce, and where the opportunities for things turning out otherwise might be found.

Nevertheless, critics like Lettow and others might still hold that even if there is room for addressing human injustices within theories of new materialism, it tends to get lost in all the talk about the agencies of nonhuman things and beings. They are right in so far that our epistemic attention is limited and, as a researcher, one must choose what to focus on. By spending time talking about the agentic capacities of

non-human things and beings, theories of new materialism risk downplaying, if not neglecting, the unequal relations among humans produced, for example, by capitalist structures of domination (Lettow 2017, 117; Rekret 2016, 16; Boysen 2018, 226). This line of argumentation, however, is less convincing when we start taking a closer look at recent new materialist scholarship, because the objection ignores the myriad and diverse ways in which new materialists already engage in, and re-envision, forms of social critique, including critiques of capitalism.⁴ As Latour writes in his famous and rather polemical article *Has Critique Run Out of Steam?* from 2004, the point was never to do away with critique altogether, but to move towards a more realist, indeed empiricist, ethos of critique: “the critical mind, if it is to renew itself and be relevant again, is to be found in the cultivation of a *stubbornly realist attitude*.” (Latour 2004, 231). What he and other new materialists are getting at is a slower, more careful, and indeed caring, type of critique that emphasizes construction over deconstruction, affirmation over debunking, and pays attention to the more-than-human matters that also matter (Latour 2004, 232).⁵

This is by no means meant to leave capitalism off the hook. As Donna Haraway writes in *Staying with the Trouble* from 2016, if she were to choose one label for our current times, “surely it must be the Capitalocene” and not the Anthropocene, because there is no coming to terms with the unfolding ecological crises without also coming to terms with the widespread and destructive capacities of capitalist extraction and accumulation (Haraway 2016, 47). The problem, however, according to Haraway, is that *both* the concepts of “the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene teeter constantly on the brink of becoming much Too Big” (2016, 50). These grand concepts, she argues, all too easily bring us into the realm of global narratives about distant structures – what Latour (2015, 138) elsewhere calls the dangers of ‘global thinking’ – that takes us further away from the tangible relations and the particular constellations of forces, human and nonhuman, that make up these structures to begin with, and from where any sort of actual political change must begin.⁶

In a similar vein, the multispecies anthropologist Anna Tsing spends the majority of her thought-provoking book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* from 2015 talking about capitalism – not capitalism as a singular global system, but as a ‘patchwork’ of situated supply chains, such as those surrounding the complex histories of the Matsutake mushrooms (Tsing 2015). Throughout this genre-bending book, Tsing describes the ways in which capitalist accumulation have led to the destruction of natural habitats in Japan and the US, the displacement of human communities, and the exploitation of cheap labor, while simultaneously exploring the many ways in which both humans and other species are finding new ways of living amidst the ruins of capitalism. Tsing does not offer any simple or straightforward critique of capitalism as an overarching global system, but helps situate our critical thinking about capitalism within the local, material, and more-than-human “patches” of salvage accumulation that enable its (seemingly) global reach (Tsing 2015, 61–63).

Similarly, the political theorist William Connolly addresses the ills of capitalism head on in his eclectic new materialist-inspired book *The Fragility of Things* from 2013. Here he shows, among other things, that one of the problems with late-stage capitalism and its neoliberal imaginaries is that it routinely ignores, with grave consequences, the active, dynamic, and often fragile character of the many nonhuman forces and ecosystems upon which human societies depend: “as neoliberalism proceeds it diverts attention from multiple conjunctions between capitalism and a variety of nonhuman force fields with differential powers of self-organization.” (Connolly 2013, 4) Like Tsing, Connolly offers no simple answers as to how we might respond to the increasing ecological fragility created by capitalist accumulation around the world, but argue that what is needed today is a multi-sited pluralist coalition, a ‘militant’ assembles of multiple forces, human and nonhuman, operating at many scales at once – a political strategy he has more recently referred to as a “politics of swarming” (Connolly 2017a). For Connolly, too, a new materialist sensibility towards the agentic capacities of nonhuman force-fields go hand in hand with a critique of, even militant opposition to, the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism.

In response to the charge that new materialism undermines social critique, new materialist thinker Jane Bennett goes so far as to suggest, in a short essay from 2005 called *In Parliament with Things*, that she would stop talking about the agency of vibrant matter altogether, if she thought it would bring even a tiny bit of social justice for humans:

I would gladly defer the attempt to speak a word on behalf of the political salience of nonhumans if doing so would produce a stronger, old-fashioned kind of democracy, with, for example, national elections where all human votes are counted, or Presidents who considered themselves accountable to the human electorate, or a news media that was independent, intelligent and critical or a system of taxation that did not produce a vast and obscene gap between rich and poor humans. (Bennett 2005a, 144–45)

But, as she also writes, it is not clear at all that these “two kinds of democratization, one human-centered and one not, are related in this way” (Bennett, 2007: 145). In fact, the two projects might be much more constructively aligned, as I argue in more detail below. This is the hope of the new materialists like Bennett: not to do away with social critique altogether, but to reinvigorate and pluralize it.

As these examples – and I could have chosen many more – suggest, new materialist scholarship is both theoretically and pragmatically compatible with engaging in forms of social and capitalist critique. In a bit of a roundabout way, therefore, Lettow is right to suggest that theories of new materialism are not so different from older forms of materialism. They are both interested in understanding how existing social relations arise out of and rely upon underlying material relations.⁷ With new materialism, however, the emphasis on material forces is extended beyond the human and socio-centrism of earlier versions of historical and economic materialism and towards all the more-than-human material forces, things, and beings that co-structure relations between human beings.⁸

Objection II: Who is to blame?

A related critique is that even if theories of new materialism do not ignore power relations among human beings altogether, the forms of politics and ethical orientations they prescribe to address the ongoing injustices of human suffering and environmental destruction are insufficient, if not downright counterproductive. This, at any rate, is the claim of eco-Marxist Andreas Malm, who delivers a fierce critique of theories of new materialism in his book *The Progress of This Storm* from 2017. After dismissing postmodernism as a form of social theory that have irreparably retreated “into the pure air of text,” Malm moves on to denounce new materialism – with Latour and Bennett being some of the main targets – as a “brigade” of theorists, who want to “throw the received wisdom on agency out of the window,” (Malm 2018, 88) and in effect leave us with no way to distinguish between the unique agential capacities of human beings and that of other things and beings:

“Shall we then say that an assemblage of actants appear ... where the humans in question had no agency *qualitative different* from that of the coal and the hulls and all the other materials present? This would seem to be the message new materialism and the wider material turn would convey about the scene, immediately raising the question of whether they would not rather engulf it in darkness.” (Malm 2018, 83; original emphasis)

Theories of new materialism, he writes, “partitions agency so that unintended consequences are seen as the outcome of some material actant is also a theory that evacuates the world of recklessness, improvident earth, livability, responsibility and a whole range of other moral parameters” (Malm 2018, 95).

In the context of the Anthropocene and its unfolding ecological crises, a particular concern of Malm and other post-Marxists is new materialism’s so-called ‘flat’ ontology, which places humans and nonhuman agencies on the same ontological plane, makes us unable to ascribe responsibility for the ongoing climate crisis to human beings. This concern echoes earlier critiques of new materialism, such as the one by political theorist Sharon Krause, who argues in her article *Bodies in Action* from 2011 that by “denying the link between agency and a subjectivity ... new materialism threatens to eviscerate the ground for

holding persons responsible” (Krause 2011, 317).⁹ A similar point is articulated, albeit in more definitive terms, by Benjamin Boysen in the article already cited above, where he writes: “The erasure of the distinction between agency and sheer cause *evidently* has quite nasty consequences as concerns moral and political responsibility. For if everybody and everything are accountable, then no one is” (Boysen 2018: 238; my emphasis).

Malm takes this line of argumentation to its logical extremes in his discussion of ‘fossil capitalism’, the name given to the specific socio-political constellation of economic powers that arose in the transition from water mills to coal-powered machines during the early industrial revolution of Great Britain in the late 18th century (see also Malm, 2016). Accepting a new materialist ontology and ascribing agentic capacities beyond the human, Malm argues, blunts our analytical capacities and makes us unable to say whether it is human beings or the coal itself, who are responsible for today’s global warming:

“Applied to the early days of the fossil economy, it would imply that, say, the coal in the steamboat, the vapor, the iron of the boiler, the piston of the engine, the stoker, the captain, the directors of the company, the carbon dioxide in the column of dense smoke made up an assemblage of swarming actants, each with its own ‘strivings’, none more central or determinant than the other”. (2017, 83)

To be frank, it is hard to believe that Malm himself is entirely convinced by this *reduction ad absurdum*.¹⁰ Even a slightly more sympathetic reading of new materialist work reveals that a flat or horizontal ontology does not mean that the ontological terrain cannot be rugged, or that there are never any forces or regularities that are more durable and persistent than others. For new materialists like Bennett and Latour, the claim was never that because more than human agencies matter, everything must matter *in the same way, all the time*.¹¹ That truly would be an absurd position. Theories of new materialism are not only compatible with studying relations of capitalist domination between human beings, as shown above, but also with assigning moral and political responsibility to particular human beings. When doing so, however, the investigations of ‘who is to blame?’ must be analytically and ethically situated within a

broader material context where humans are neither sovereign nor the sole sources of agency. In other words, the reconceptualizations of agency engaged in by new materialists are not meant to dispel notions of human responsibility altogether, but to reach a better, indeed more ‘realistic’, understanding of the complex relationship between agency and moral culpability.

To see what this might look like, let us turn to the example of the American Northeast blackout of 2003 discussed at length by Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* (2010). The conventional story of the blackout was that it was the deregulation of the energy net caused by the Energy Policy Act of 1992, which made it possible for companies to buy electricity from distant places and in turn overburdening the transmission lines, that eventually caused an event like the blackout. While this legislative change played an important part of the story, it is only *part* of the story according to Bennett. The Northeast blackout is better understood, she argues, as the endpoint of a cascade that involved both human and nonhuman entities in a sort of confederate agency (Bennett 2010, 24; see also Bennett 2005b). On the day of the blackout, the electricity flow suddenly reversed its intended direction, a phenomenon called loop flows, immediately causing the whole grid to disrupt. Material flows, such as electricity, “sometimes goes where we send it, and sometimes it chooses its path on the spot, in response to the other bodies it encounters and the surprising opportunities for actions and interactions that they afford” (Bennett 2010, 28). In other words, to truly understand what happened on the 14th of August 2003, we cannot limit our analyses to the intentional actions of human beings alone.

Bennett’s position here is not that we must therefore give up assigning responsibility to human beings altogether and instead assign it to the electricity or the grid itself. We still can, and in this case should, critique the original decision to deregulate the electricity network. But it would also be wrong to assign complete responsibility to human actions taking place in 1992 for what was the emergent outcome of multiple complex processes aligning in 2003. What Bennett’s theory of distributed agency does, with open eyes, is that it “presents individuals as simply incapable of bearing *full* responsibility for their

effects.” (Bennett 2010, 37; original emphasis). This might sound radical, but it also seems about right. After all, it is difficult to predict with any kind of certainty the long-term outcome of one's immediate actions when they take place in the context of a world populated by multiple other agencies that changes the course of events. The intentional actions of human beings in 1992 would not, in itself, have been enough to bring about the blackout in 2003 had it not been for a whole series of other contingent events that followed in its wake.

Again, this does not alleviate the human actors of their responsibility altogether, even if does take off *some* of the blame. Bennett’s notion of distributive agency attenuates “the blame game,” but it does not give up “the project of identifying (what Arendt called’) the sources of harmful effect.” (Bennett 2010, 37). When it comes to ethical questions of individual human responsibility, the aim for Bennett is not so much locating sources of intentional human actions, but to become more aware of the unfolding assemblages of confederate agency we are participating (more or less intentionally) in. Only then can we ask the more explicitly ethical questions such as: “Do I attempt to extricate myself from assemblages whose trajectory is likely to do harm? Do I enter in the proximity of assemblages whose conglomerate effectivity tends toward the enactment of nobler ends?” (Bennett 2010, 38). Rather than assigning singular blame, this is a much more constructive conversation to have about ethical responsibility, especially when it comes to complex phenomena like the politics of climate change in which we are all imbricated in various ways. This is not to leave the oil lobbyists and corporate elites off the hook, far from it, but to broaden the scope of the debate and engage in a more nuanced conversation about the many different agencies, intentional and otherwise, human and more-than-human, that are contributing to the maintaining the gridlock of the status quo.

Haraway, too, is happy to talk about responsibility, but like Bennett, she offers a notion of responsibility that dislodges it from intentionality and human reason, referring instead to what she calls response-ability – the ability to respond (Haraway 2016, 78).¹² Instead of responsibility, which searches for a singular

source of blame, Haraway is interested in the subterranean, corporeal, and affective ways in which humans, and other bodies, are oriented towards the world and become able to respond to certain things and beings, while remaining unresponsive to others. In order to take responsibility for something, to care for it, whether other human beings, an animal, a plant, or the world as such, we must first be able to sense and respond to its needs and desires. As Haraway writes, “responsibility ... requires the cultivation of viral response-abilities, carrying meanings and materials across kinds in order to infect processes and practices that might yet ignite epidemics of multispecies recuperation and maybe even flourishing on terra in ordinary times and places.” (Haraway 2016, 114). When we fail our responsibilities, it follows, it is not always a matter of intentional neglect or deciding to do otherwise, but also often because we remain sensorially and corporeally incapable of responding appropriately to the calls for need that exist around us.

This might sound like an overly idiosyncratic notion of responsibility, which brings us too far away from any common-sensical notion of what responsibility is. But here it is worth noting at least two things: First, that conventional notions of responsibility, which emphasizes individual human intention, do not seem to be particularly helpful when thinking about the entangled crises of the Anthropocene. Can we really say that anyone is responsible, in the strict sense of the word, for a phenomenon as complex as the unfolding climatic and ecological crisis? If the blame is put squarely on the shoulders of the global economic elites, does that absolve everyone else of their responsibility? Second, and more substantively, this reconfiguration of responsibility is in line with recent innovations within social and political theory about the relationship between individual responsibility and intra-human injustices, but brings these one step further. In Sharon Krause’s book-length discussion of human agency and responsibility from 2015, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty*, one of the core arguments is that if we focus only on the injustices that follow from intentional human actions, such as racial and gendered discrimination, we risk overlooking the many ways in which people contribute to, and uphold, unjust structures and patterns of behavior in unintentional ways (Krause 2015). Despite Krause’s own reservations about theories of new materialism,

is this not exactly what the new materialists are trying to say in a new register and in relation to the more than human world as well? That we need a more expansive vocabulary for thinking about responsibility, which is better suited for when the sources of agency are neither intentional nor strictly individual, but much more diffused and distributed, as is often the case with complex phenomena like climate change.

The post-Marxist critics, in their eagerness to dismiss theories of new materialism, collapse these distinctions and fall back on a simple understanding of responsibility as inseparable from intentional human action. Malm cites, for example, the philosopher of language Frederick Stoutland for saying: “There is no action where there is no intentional acting. What distinguishes mere behavior — where things happen but there is no agency — from acting, is that the latter is intentional under at least one description. Acting, that is to say, is essentially intentional”; without ‘the capacity to act for reasons’, there can be no talk of genuine agency” (Malm 2018, 85). Malm continues, that “on the popular and philosophical view having agency is intimately tied to having a mind,” and without mind and intentionality, there can be no talk of responsibility (Malm 2018, 85). While this popular view is both a familiar and common-sensical philosophical position, it completely dismisses without substantive argument the nuances of the reconceptualizations and reformulations of the links between intentionality and responsibility engaged in by the new materialists. On this view, any talk of confederate and distributed agency leads, almost by definition, amounts to a complete dismissal of human responsibility and the impossibility of assigning blame to human beings.

For the new materialists, as already shown, talking about more-than-human agencies is entirely compatible with ascribing responsibility to the intentional actions of human beings, as long as it is not done in absolute terms. As Haraway writes in *Staying With the Trouble*, there is no denying that the activities of “situated, actual human beings matter. It matters with which ways of living and dying we cast our lot rather than others. It matters not just to human beings, but also to those many critters across taxa which and whom we have subjected to exterminations, extinctions, genocides, and prospects of

futurelessness” (Haraway 2016, 55). Bennett is willing to go so far as to suggest, in a more ethical register, that she cannot envision “any polity so egalitarian that important human needs, such as health or survival, would not take priority.” (Bennett 2010, 104) The goal was never to eliminate all differences between human beings and the rest of the world, as critics suggest, but to “examine instead the affinities across these differences.” (Bennett 2010, 104). The doings of situated human beings matter, but they must be scrutinized, critiqued, and eventually transformed with an eye to the many and myriad ways in which all that which is not human, which is more than human, matters too. Otherwise, we risk losing our sight for a lot of the matters that matter. That, in essence, is the new materialist wager.

Theories of new materialism do not deny the role and agency of situated human beings. New materialists, too, are interested in addressing the power relations between human beings, and many of them continue to rely on and extend insights from other theoretical traditions, such as post-Marxism and poststructuralism, which offer a vocabulary for doing so. What new materialists are pushing back against is the claim that human beings, and their intentional actions, are all that really matter, as when Malm writes that the origins of the ongoing ecological crises “belongs *exclusively* to those humans who extract, buy, sell and combust fossil fuels, and to those who uphold this circuit, and to those who have committed these acts over the past two centuries...” (Malm 2018, 112; original emphasis). The new materialist worry is, and I believe rightly so, that some of these post-Marxist traditions lack a sufficiently capacious language for thinking about the ways those relations operate in continuity with relations that are always also more-than-human. What the new materialists are trying to do is re-balancing the scales after centuries of anthropocentrism in order to show that human beings, their thoughts, and their intentional actions are inhabiting this world alongside a whole range of other things and beings whose agencies matter too.

Objection III: Do we have time for new materialism?

When reading post-Marxist critiques of new materialism that make sweeping arguments against an entire and diverse theoretical tradition, it is difficult not to wonder if they are really motivated by a desire to

mount a convincing philosophical critique. The persistence of caricatures and bad-faith readings make them appear more like strategic attempts to push back at a recent academic trend. Could it be that the underlying desire to discount theories of new materialism have more to do with political strategizing than genuine theoretical disagreement? It would make sense. After all, for someone like Malm, the political roadmap out of the ongoing ecological crises is already abundantly clear.: We must “[d]are to feel the panic. Then choose between the main two options: commit the most militant unwavering opposition to this system, or sit watching as it all goes down the drain.” (Malm 2018, 226). We already know everything we need to know about the ecological crisis and its capitalist origins. Now is time to act – and we are running out of time.

In this context of practical and political urgency, new materialism’s philosophical fabrications about more-than-human agencies and hybrid networks can begin to look more like a foe than an ally. Perhaps it is this political impatience, rather than a specific philosophical disagreement, that explains the deep animosity that some post-Marxists seem to have towards theories of new materialism. However, even though I understand and empathize with the feeling of impatience in light of the ongoing crises, I am not convinced that dismissing all of new materialism’s insights about the agentic capacities of nonhuman entities and the entanglement of humans and nature is a desirable strategy – neither philosophically nor politically. In order to see why, it is time to move beyond the negative defenses of new materialism offered in the previous two sections and provide a more affirmative argument. The argument is not only can ‘old’ and ‘new’ forms of materialism can co-exist, but that theories of new materialism entail valuable insights needed for the political project sketched out by the post-Marxists themselves. Because, Malm is right that there is no way of addressing the ongoing ecological crises of the Anthropocene (or Capitalocene) without a radical resistance carried out by the many against the few – and here I think he is right – we still need a better political language to understand how we might get there: What will it take to create a critical mass of people willing to take on this task?

One of the new materialist worries is that some eco-Marxist analyses of the Anthropocene, and its ongoing ecological crises, jump all too quickly from the historical critiques of fossil capitalism to the political demand that people take to the streets.¹³ In between these two moments lie a whole range of other forms of less eventful politics that are about the constitution of certain political affects over others and the subjectivation of particular kinds of (human) subjects. As Connolly writes in his book *Aspirational Fascism*, if we can learn something from the rise of the far right, and characters like Trump, it is just how effective a political strategy it can be to tap into the visceral energies of subdued political affects.¹⁴ In order to counter the existing desires that fuel both the rise of the right and the ongoing capitalist pursuits of extraction and accumulation, the political struggle for a more ecologically sustainable world must itself be coupled with an affective and sensorial ‘micropolitics’ that seeks to cultivate the broader popular support needed to carry out the macro-political transformations towards a more sustainable world that Malm and others have in mind (Bennett 2010, xi).

Therefore, when new materialists like Bennett talk about the need for a new sensorial orientation towards the more-than-human world, or when Haraway talks about response-ability instead of responsibility, it is not an attempt to dismiss the need for a collective politics of democratic resistance, but because they understand that the realm of macropolitics is informed and co-shaped by another more visceral and subterranean realm of affective micropolitics that help bring certain kinds of politics into being, while preventing others from doing so. As Bennett writes, there “will be no greening of the economy, no redistribution of wealth, no enforcement or extension of rights without human dispositions, moods and cultural ensembles hospitable to these effects” (Bennett 2010, xii). The hope of the new materialists is that paying attention to the entanglements and interdependencies between human beings and the rest of the world, might help build a more ethical disposition towards it.

Another problem, and another reason why eco-Marxists need the new materialists – and vice versa – is that despite what Malm suggests, the road to salvation is not clear at all. There is no simple binary choice

facing ordinary people or societies at large to which they must choose either ‘redemption’ through active resistance, or ‘downfall’ through passive inaction. What the new materialists remind us is that, whether we like it or not, the situation is much more complicated than that. The ongoing ecological crises are not only a crisis of politics and social structures and ongoing exploitation of natural resources – although it certainly is that too – but also a much more pervasive and ominous philosophical and existential crises of human inattention to the needs and desire of the more-than-human world on which we depend. It is not just that we are *acting* too slowly today, but that we find ourselves in a place where we can no longer *think* properly, and where familiar concepts, such as Man or Capitalism, are constantly turning out at once to be more ephemeral, dispersed, and situated than expected, while remaining ever-more pervasive, persistent, and difficult to think outside (Haraway 2016, 31).

On the frontiers of the so-called hard sciences, leading biologists have started arguing that the old distinctions between ‘individuals’ and ‘environments’ are much more elusive than previously assumed (Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber 2012). And even if capitalism was, at one point, a descriptive term for a specific set of economic relations between workers and employees, its myriad and complex modern-day manifestations and its accelerating entanglements with new technologies, financialization, and its uneasy partnership with liberal democracies make it a patchier and more multifarious beast (Gibson-Graham 2006). It is no longer evident, if it ever was, what exactly it would mean to ‘take down’ capitalism. Despite the charges of obscurantism leveled against new materialism, it seems to me that a concept like capitalism is often at least as elusive as Bennett’s vibrant assemblages or Haraway’s tentacle string figures.

The charge of elusiveness does not mean, of course, that a concept is analytically or politically useless. After all, conceptual openness and contestability are integral elements of political concepts – just think about a concept like freedom. Moreover, eco-Marxists like Malm are completely right to suggest that any convincing analysis of the Anthropocene and its ongoing climatic and ecological crises *must* say

something about the dynamics of global capitalism and the differentiated responsibilities among human beings. But it would be equally wrong to go from there to suggest that capitalist structures, and the underlying human relations of power, are everything that keeps the world going and that it is all we must study. In the end, what new materialism offers is an attempt to *expand* and *further* these critiques, even if that sometimes requires *displacing* them for a moment. Not because critiques of capitalism are not important, but in order to help us see what else is there and begin addressing some of the many other ways in which the world and politics unfold. Even if capitalism ended tomorrow there would be plenty of work left to do. This is why new materialists insist on *slowing down* in order to reorient ourselves and pay attention to the more-than-human world around us, while recognizing the simultaneous need to *speed up* the processes of democratic resistance and coalition-building. For the new materialists, therefore, the mantra is not Malm's commanding 'either or', but a much more ambiguous and multifarious 'both and'.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have argued that some of the main critiques leveled against theories of new materialism in recent years by critical post-Marxist theorists – for example that new materialists undermine social critique and reject human responsibility – are unconvincing and rely on misinterpretations, sometimes even caricatures, of new materialist scholarship. As I have shown, theories of new materialism are entirely compatible with studying and critiquing the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and domination, and can engage explicitly in discussions about the role and relative weight of human responsibility. The confusion arises, however, because the new materialists are aiming to shift the ground beneath earlier debates about 'critique' and 'responsibility' away from their previous anthropocentric frameworks. When they talk about the active and agentic capacities of more than human things and beings, new materialists are trying to bring our attention to a more subterranean kind of affective politics that underpin the current gridlock of politics around climate change and has to do with the way in which we, humans in Western settings, think of ourselves in relation to the rest of the world. Thus, rather than inhibit it,

theories of new materialism can assist the political project envisaged by post- and eco-Marxists by infusing it with a micropolitics of sensorial affects needed to bring about changes at greater scales.

This argument is not a wholesale defense of new materialism. There are other critiques, which I have not been able to address here, that I think are more difficult for new materialism to deal with. Amongst these are the lack of attention given to matters of race within a lot of new materialist scholarship, such how the colonial histories of domination of racialized bodies intersect with the denigration of matter to a passive substrate that can be extracted at will (Yusoff 2018), as well as the critiques by ecofeminist and indigenous scholars that that theories of new materialism silences past and present knowledge, which already pay attention to the entanglement of human beings and the rest of the world and the active capacities of nonhuman things and beings (Todd 2016; MacGregor 2021).

Neither is this article an attempt to say that all eco-Marxists must become new materialists. What I am arguing, instead, is in favor of a pluralism of theoretical and political approaches. The complex and multi-faceted crises of the Anthropocene requires that we keep space open for experimentation and thinking anew. Nevertheless, the post-Marxists critics are right to raise the question: Are theories of new materialism up to the task of addressing the ongoing injustices of the Anthropocene and its ecological crises? Is it really the time to hesitate, to slow down, and reflect upon the entanglement of human beings and the rest of the world in a time where economic elites and powerful corporate interests are weaponizing and speeding up, while crises of all kinds are constantly accelerating?

These are difficult questions, and ones that theories of new materialism – and all other theoretical orientations for that matter – must be able to answer in one way or another. In this article, I have given one possible answer by talking about the importance of a micropolitics of affects that can help support the macro-political transformations eco-Marxists are calling for. There are many other ways to answer too. In the end, the purpose of this article has been to help shift the ground of the current debates between ‘old’ and ‘new’ forms of materialisms, so that in the future critiques of new materialism could be couched in

terms of genuine questions of shared concern rather than as scathing rebuttals of theoretical caricatures that no one endorses. If what I have argued in this paper is even remotely right, the eco-Marxists and new materialists are, both theoretically and politically, trying to navigate the same troubling waters. Although they are caught up in different intellectual currents, they might even be headed for the same shore.

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Notes

¹ See for example Bennett 2010; Haraway 2016; Latour 2017.

² There were more than 3,000 hits with the search term "new materialism" on Google Scholar for the year 2022. For an overview of the development in the number of books about new materialism, see: https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=new+materialism&year_start=2000&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3

³ This more general trend is also sometimes referred to with other slightly different terms such as "the ontological turn" (Kohn 2015).

⁴ For a related argument, see also Tobias Skiveren (2023, forthcoming), who argues convincingly that rather than dismissing critique, new materialist scholarship seeks to "supplement these critical methodologies with more affectively engaged modes of scholarship." See also Gamble, Hanan, and Nail (2019) for generous introduction to theories of new materialism and its relation to older forms of materialism.

⁵ For more extended arguments on the notion of slowing down in order to study the complexities of the ongoing ecological crises, see also Rose, *Slow writing for the anthropocene* (2013) and Stengers, *Another science is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science* (2018).

⁶ See also Ejsing, *The Arrival of the Anthropocene* (2022).

⁷ For one of the more convincing attempts at integrating a new materialism into eco-Marxist thought, see for example Jason Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015), where he insists on studying capitalism through a lens he calls 'world-ecology', which entails a much more expansive understanding of how human and non-humans forces come together, and are put to work, under capitalist systems. Interestingly, Moore has been publicly

disavowed by other influential eco-Marxist, such as Andreas Malm and John Bellamy Forster. Moore's own response to his critics can be found here (2022).

⁸In the end, this position is not that far from Lettow's own position towards the end of her article, where she seeks to reconcile the projects of the 'old' and 'new' forms of materialism through a critical-yet-constructive engagement with the work of Diana Coole and Donna Haraway (Lettow 2016, 116-18).

⁹ She repeats this critique of new materialism in her later book-length discussions of human agency and responsibility in *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty* (2015).

¹⁰ For a related argument about how Malm's polemical critiques of new materialism amount to a form of "shadowboxing", see Skiveren (forthcoming, 2023).

¹¹ Latour (2007) engages in an insightful discussion about when and how particular things and beings become 'political' in his short article *Turning Around Politics* from 2007.

¹² The term 'response-ability' is used no less than forty-five times throughout the book.

¹³ For a related critique from within critical theory circles, see also Bue Rübner Hansen's impressive engagement with Malm's work and its advantages and blind spots, *The Kaildoscope of Catstrophe*, in Viewpoint Magazine (2021).

¹⁴ For an insightful analysis of how Trump managed to effectively use a micropolitics of hitherto subdued affects in his favor, see Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism* (2017b).