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by

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Founding Stone

A discussion of Charles T. Wolfe's *Lire le matérialisme*

Pietro D. Omodeo, Charles T. Wolfe *

*Pietro Daniel Omodeo and Charles T. Wolfe discuss the latter's book *Lire le matérialisme* (Lyon: ENS éditions, 2020, 292 p., ISBN 9791036202377 et 9791036202391, <http://doi.org/10.4000/books.enseditions.15838>) and the prospects of a cosmological and politico-epistemological, and above all, intelligent materialism.*



1. Historical Epistemology of the Material Soul in a Material Cosmos

In a paper of 2010 entitled “From Spinoza to the Socialist Cortex: Steps Toward the Social Brain”, Charles T. Wolfe presented a Spinozist and communitarian conception of the mind resting on a variety of influences: ontological conceptions from the *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata*, insights on the General Intellect from Karl Marx’s “Fragment on Machines” (*Grundrisse*, notebooks VI-VII), Soviet neuropsychology à la Vygotsky, and Antonio Negri’s social conception of the brain seen as a materialist replacement of the *Geist* of the classical

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philosophy of the mind.¹ In Wolfe's merging of modern and postmodern materialist views on the psyche, Spinoza constituted the source for a conception, in which the individual mind is an abstraction as it primarily depends on a collective fundamental ontology. Hence, the individual cannot have any priority over the collective. Such an approach goes counter Cartesian egocentric epistemology (and the corresponding dualistic ontology) and in psychological approaches that posit the individual mind (and brain) as isolated both methodologically and ontologically. Following Spinoza, Charles claimed that the individual ought to be seen as an intersection within a cosmos of relations (as the *mode* of an *infinite* substance). This is why, a Spinoza-inspired collectivist and materialist psychology has to consider not only the mind but even the brain as plunged in a cultural continuum that shapes it. In 2010, Wolfe stressed the relevance of Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria for a materialist (that is, brain-centered) outlook on the collective mind. As for Marx's concept of the General Intellect, it constitutes the basis for a communist theory of the mind or, which is the same, of a culture-and-technology powered social brain. In fact, because the intellectual sphere is determined by the technical organization of a mechanized postindustrial world. Furthermore, the centrality of the technical organization of life (including the social brain) acquires special relevance in the light of Italian *operaismo*, in particular views on immaterial labor as part of our technological world. This has implications for the Anthropocene debate because, as Wolfe suggests, a materialist and collectivist theory of the mind/brain offers apt instruments to address the noosphere problem (which corresponds, today, the interlinked problems of knowledge economy and the technosphere).² As Matteo Pasquinelli has recently argued for, cybernetics intelligence is an essential dimension of the current carbon-silicon Capitalism.³ It has taken the form of a technological General

¹ Charles T. Wolfe, "From Spinoza to the Socialist Cortex: Steps Toward the Social Brain", in Deborah Hauptmann and Warren Neidich, eds., *Cognitive Architecture: From Biopolitics to Noopolitics; Architecture and Mind in the Age of Communication and Information* (Rotterdam: 010 Publ., 2010), 184-206.

² Jürgen Renn, *The Evolution of Knowledge: Rethinking Science for the Anthropocene* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2020), especially pp. 382-84. On the technosphere, cf. Peter Haff, "Technology as a Geological Phenomenon: Implications for Human Well-Being", in *A Stratigraphical Basis for the Anthropocene*, ed. by C. N. Waters et al., Special Publications 395 (London: Geological Society, 2014), 301-309.

³ Cf. Matteo Pasquinelli, "The Automaton of the Anthropocene: On Carbosilicon Machines and

Intellect of algorithmic governance. Babbage's 19th-century vistas on the mechanization of thought (an anticipation of IT-technology, AI and machine learning) is the source of the Marx's analysis and critique of the General Intellect which could still prove a key concept to comprehend the technocratic world we live in.¹

Ten years after the seminal political-epistemological essay on the social brain of 2010, Wolfe offers the academic community of historians and philosophers of science a larger work on materialism, *Lire le materialisme*, in which the problem of the brain maintains central stage but is connected to more general concerns about enlightened materialism, while the political implications remain implicit in the background. Of the two main strands of materialism, which he indicates in the introduction, cosmological and psychological, Wolfe here privileges the latter, the mind-body problem and the statute of the self, rather than the material constitution of reality. After chapter one introduces radical Enlightenment philosophy as a yardstick to reflect on materialism in general, and chapter two the question of whether materialism and atheism belong together by necessity, the central part of the book (from chapter three to seven) address psychological, cognitive and mental problems linked to the brain and the body. The final chapter (eight) and the conclusion (nine) deal with Anglophone new materialism, stresses the importance of the reflection on embodiment and points out the difference between past and present views on embodiment. A preface by Pierre-François Moreau emphasizes the explorative character of this book, which offers a problem-oriented discussion of materialism—a *typological and hybrid* approach—to deal with a lineage of thought that was neither unitary nor continuous. In fact, as Wolfe stresses in chapter one, in spite of the importance of 18th-century French philosophy for the definition of modern materialism, the category of 'materialism' itself emerged out of a polemical context. In fact, it was coined by its detractors, beginning with the first use by Cambridge Platonist Henry More in the 17th century, similar to other denigratory constructions such as 'atheism', 'Spinozism' and 'libertinism'. La Mettrie possibly was the first thinker who consciously chose to call himself a materialist.

Cyberfossil Capital", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no 2 (2017): 311-26.

¹ Matteo Pasquinelli, "On the Origins of Marx's General Intellect", in *Radical Philosophy*, 2nd ser., no. 06 (2019): 43-56.

Chapter One, “Are We the Heirs of Enlightenment?”, is important in two respects. It emphasizes the importance to look at the Enlightenment as an important context for modern materialism and it indicates the main points of materialist ‘creed’, then and now. The first three fundamental ones are the following:

- 1 the cosmological thesis, “All that exist is material”;
- 2 the psychological thesis, “All mental phenomena are inseparable from a bodily and physical processes”;
- 3 the anti-teleological thesis, “Only efficient causes offer legitimate explanations of nature”.

In addition to these central assumptions, Wolfe remarks that, since the Enlightenment, materialism shows a bias towards

- 4 reductionism,
- 5 anti-humanism
(by assuming a continuity between the animal and the human), and
- 6 atheism (a problem to which chapter two is specifically devoted). Furthermore, Wolfe introduces two perspectives, which he particularly attributes to Diderot and play a major role in his own understanding of materialism:

7 *vitalo-matérialisme*, which looks at life as the fundamental property of the material world and therefore puts biology at the center of philosophy rather than physics contrary to physical-reductionist tendencies and

8 anti-foundationism, according to which rational-empirical scientific and philosophical reflection makes without any form of *first philosophy* and metaphysics.

The problem of metaphysics here emerges, to which the materialist philosophy that Wolfe outlines had a two-sided approach. In fact, Wolfe oscillates between the negation and the acknowledgment that Enlightenment materialism was ‘metaphysical’ in its essence. Actually, it dealt with the problems that traditionally fell under the compass of metaphysics: 1. ontology, or the nature of reality, 2. cosmology, or the question of the physical universe, and 3. anthropology, or the place of humans in the world (p. 23). On the one hand, Wolfe emphasizes the importance of the connection between materialism and the natural sciences as the advancement of the latter constantly reshapes the relationship between philosophy and the empirical results of the sciences. As Gaston Bachelard argued, “le matérialisme scientifique est constamment en instance

de *nouvelle fondation*"¹. This constant search for updated foundations, though, does not imply the *absence* of foundations, unless one projects a typically post-modern attitude onto past materialism. On the other hand, the negation of a meta-level of philosophy beyond the natural raises the question of the relation between materialism and naturalism, that is, to philosophies of nature without transcendence. This latter question has important consequences relative to what philosophies should be included in the canon of materialism, as it depends on the answer whether the canon comprises Renaissance and early-modern naturalisms—from Paduan radical Aristotelianism to Telesio's nature *iuxta propria principia*, Bruno's infinitist ontology without hierarchies and, eventually, Spinozism. Wolfe propounds for the exclusion of naturalism as a *metaphysics* of nature and favors regional ontologies, based on the pluralist developments of the natural sciences and medicine.

The exclusion of the identification of materialism with the philosophy of immanence has further consequences for the question of whether "materialism must be atheistic"—which is the question of chapter two. As a matter of fact, *a historical fact*, forms of Christian materialism emerged in the past, for instance in the case of Milton and Hobbes. Wolfe argues that atheism often descended from a radicalization of rational theology and was more in need of ethical motivations than a materialist philosophy. Yet, a strong connection with atheism is witnessed by prominent 18th-century materialists, such as Diderot, Meslier and d'Holbach. Wolfe furthermore points out that the connection between materialism and science is by no means necessary. As history shows, neither materialism nor atheism are really founded on the sciences. They do not derive their strongest arguments from empirical evidence but rather from philosophical premises. This is an important point in the economy of Wolfe's discourse because, although the connection between materialism and the natural sciences is an important one, this should not justify forms of scientism. Philosophical materialism has a radicality that reaches far beyond the sciences.

Beginning with Chapter three, on the materialist *rêve*, Wolfe enters a difficult realm for materialist thought, that of imagination, consciousness and the self. "La métaphysique (!) matérialiste—Wolfe asserts—a besoin du concept de rêve pour pouvoir assimiler le sens interne" (p. 77). Diderot's *Rêve de D'Alembert* of-

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *Le matérialisme rationnel* (Paris: PUF, 1963), 7.

fers the occasion to talk about an activity of the mind, which comes very close to the unconscious. It resembles a form of delirium or *furor* and has a heuristic function. The *rêve* is a means to go beyond the self, which is particularly important for materialism as the latter is a philosophy in the third person rather than in first person. Its consistency is that of matter's "universal sensitivity". It also has a fundamental scientific relevance as it seeks for connections that are deeper than immediacy and makes proto-scientific concepts emerge. It is the "mythopoeitic" faculty at the basis of the analogies of science (p. 82). Again, positivistic scientism needs to be reversed: it is not the sciences at a given historical stage and the facts they establish that are revealing of reality but rather, the other way around, the *furor* is revealing of the nature of living and sensing matter. This intriguing discussion opens up old-new perspectives on the materiality of the inner sense and the imaginative creativity at the source of science. Wolfe does not here consider its origins, though. Important Renaissance ties could be here signaled, which point to neo-Platonic theories of the living and sensing nature—for instance, Tommaso Campanella's *natura sensibus demonstrata*—and the ethical epistemology of the *furor* as the gate to the gist of reality—for instance, Giordano Bruno's *heroic* frenzy as a poetic-political-philosophical tendency that the philosopher experiences and enacts in his research for the infinite *natura naturans* at the source of the infinite universe.



Chapter four, *Le rire materialiste*, draws on the power of subversive laughter as an element of materialist ethics. A simple smile could be explosive, for instance that of the maid who worked for Tocqueville's bourgeoisie family and scared them all by smiling at the moment of revolutionary unrest in Paris. Laughter evidently is a form of positioning, but positioning implies choices. Wolfe suggests that laughter *in itself* is the "moral moment" of materialism or the "materialist moment" of moral (p. 102). This is a suggestive thought but it seems to me that laughter must not necessarily have the subversive-ethical character Wolfe ascribes to it. This could be evidenced by forms of derision

‘from above’ or widespread forms of cynic and sadistic laughter. Hence, Wolfe’s formula could be reversed without renouncing the connection between materialism and laughter: Materialism gives moral substance, perspectivity and content to laughter. It can be joyfully rebel—but only if it stems from a subaltern perspective, one from below.

Chapter five develops a materialist theory of the self, aimed at integrating rather than vanquishing the problem of the inner sense. Following Diderot (a constant reference point for Wolfe), one should assume that the self (the ‘moi’, the ‘soi’) is not self-transparent. It is not a Cartesian (Kantian or Husserlian) *prius* but rather a derived function. Firstly, materialism is a form of externalism. Therefore, a materialist theory of the ‘self’ posits its non-individual character, like a Spinozian mode. Secondly, the self needs to be biologized, in the sense that it is an effect not a substance, which results from a ‘debate’ between the individual living being and its world. Thirdly, consciousness always begins as the consciousness of the body. In the construction of the self, the brain plays a central role. This is the plastic organ of organized-matter memory. Chapter six discusses this conception of the brain through Diderot’s metaphor of the brain as “a book that reads itself”. Already in the 17th century, the Oxford naturalist Thomas Willis, in *De cerebri anatome* (1664), advanced a conception of the brain as an active and self-organizing organ against mechanic conceptions of it, as a passive repository of information. Diderot developed this idea further by dealing with the brain as a living book, endowed with sensitivity and memory. As far as memory is concerned, it is a product of material self-organization and not—to use a contemporary imaginary—a hardware that is passive and indifferent relative to the information that is stored in it. Rather, the relation between thought and the brain ought to be regarded as ‘dialectical’, because the former is not the mere secretion of the first, as some *Vulgärmaterialisten* of the 19th century would have had it (e.g., Carl Vogt). There is a reciprocal transformative relation between the two poles: “La pensée secrète le cerveau autant que le cerveau secrète la pensée” (p. 179).

The idea that mental activity is like a software that contingently runs on a changeable computer fits materialist ‘theories of identity’, which were initiated by the Australian triad of Ullin Place, David Armstrong and J.J.C. Smith in the 1950s and 1960s. Such a theory is materialist insofar as it posits a perfect correlation between mental activity and brain events. If looked against the background

of earlier materialisms, most importantly Diderot's vitalo-maternalism, the cerebrocentrism of identity theory shows several limitations. According to Wolfe, although identity theory argues that the brain is the location of thought, it has a narrow understanding of both poles of the correspondence. On the one hand, it does not take into account neurophysiological research. By doing so, it obliterates the broader bodily and biological dimension of our brain and, per extension, of the mind. On the other hand, identity theory reduces the mental to logic and language, therefore, it obliterates important dimensions of the mind, most importantly the emotions. Moreover, as Wolfe argues, they neglected crucial questions such as

- 1 whether the relation between thought and brain is purely contingent or is rooted in the brain's active physiological organization;

- 2 what role science plays in the explanation of the mind and *which* science is necessary to investigate the mental sphere;

- 3 whether the 'logical' assumption of a correlation is sufficient for a materialist theory, or it rather requires an 'ontology', too;

- 4 whether life is an emergent property or not out of a world in which, according to the adagio of Vienna neo-positivism, "no causes of physical effects can be non-physical" (p. 184).

In Wolfe's view, the champions of new materialisms often ignore the rich views of their 17th-century predecessors, in comparison of whom they look pale. This is not only the case with Australian identity theory but even more so with the so-called 'New Materialism'. This label refers to an Anglophone trend of scholars who mean to replace earlier mechanical materialism with a dynamic variant that eclectically draws on the "masters of suspicion"—Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. The claim that their active understanding of matter is a novelty is a gross mistake. As Wolfe remarks, it is akin to Friedrich Engels's simplistic criticism of vulgar materialism as static. Although the parallel with Engels is meant to ironically dismiss the pretenses to originality of the new materialists, it actually dismisses one important aspect of Engels's approach—as the editor, among others, of the *Theses on Feuerbach*—Engels's (and Marx's) intended to update (not to dismiss) materialism with novel insights stemming from the natural sciences and historical thought (Laplacian cosmology, Darwinian biology and critical economy). Thus, they anticipated Bachelard's precept that "scientific materialism is constantly in search of a new foundation".



Yet, the denunciation of the ignorance of many of today's materialists concerning their historical predecessors can be correct. Wolfe's retrospectives make us appreciate the complexity and, in many cases, the validity of radical Enlightenment thinkers. Even embodiment theory (with its strong feminist connotation, for instance, in Karen Barad's historical materialism of the body) could find its roots in the thought of Diderot and his age. In fact, the "matérialisme classique" was neither essentialist, nor scientist, against many prejudices concerning past materialisms. In a political note, Wolfe observes that, unlike today's institutional and academic materialism, the French Enlightenment version was radical, subversive and destabilizing.

In conclusion, we should welcome an exemplary book of historical epistemology. It has the form of *pensieri sparsi* on materialism at the encounter of history (in the first place, a reassessment of Enlightenment perspectives) and theory (identity theory, embodiment, philosophy of biology). Materialism has never been as 'vulgar' as it was often portrayed—including by (new) materialists. Wolfe's reading of materialism looks at discourses on an almost-spiritualized matter within an articulated and erudite intellectual construction. His anti-foundationalist materialism at times looks post-modern, especially when he claims for its anti-foundational spirit. By contrast, it looks metaphysical, when his inquiry is directed to the great problems of the *philosophia perennis*:

- 1 *anima*: the materialist soul quo the problem of the self as a bodily function;
- 2 *mundus*: the materialist cosmos as the negation of transcendence;
- 3 and *deus*: materialist anti-theology and the connected refusal of teleology.

Although all of these problems received a paradigmatic treatment in the *siècle des Lumières*, Wolfe could have easily found their prefigurations in the Renaissance and Antiquity. A *longue-durée* history of materialisms that does not follow the easy schemes of Friedrich Albert Lange's classic *Geschichte des Materialismus* but rather considers the variability, discontinuities and spontaneous generations of materialist world outlooks is still a desideratum. Wolfe's book is a starting point as it sets the themes and agendas for such an inquiry. Wolfe here

favors the most challenging of these issues, that is, the problem of the mind, at the expenses of cosmology. Yet, regarding the mind, too, important themes still await to be addressed, in particular the problem of ‘collective thought’ in the passage from Averroes’s *intellectus agens* to Ludwig Fleck’s *Denkkollektiv* and, perhaps, Negri’s social brain. Some readers might regret the lack of consideration of German non-vulgar materialism, from Feuerbach to Marx-and-Engels. In fact, dialectical materialism and historical materialism are not part of this book’s picture. In general, the political dimension is not present but the ethical is. The tones of the book are rather melancholic than Epicurean, as appears, among others, from the concluding invitation, taken from La Mettrie, “qu’on ne craigne point qu’il soit trop humiliant pour l’amour-propre de savoir que l’esprit est d’une nature si corporelle” (p. 250). Personally, I regard this book as the founding stone for a larger project, a cosmological and political-epistemological one, the program that Wolfe set ten years ago and is still awaiting full completion.

(Pietro D. Omodeo)



2. History of materialism and intelligent materialism

Is there a history of materialism? Can there be a history of materialism?¹ Scholars—I mean, contextualists, maybe these words are synonyms—will insist that from Democritus to Pomponazzi, or from Hobbes to Patricia Churchland, there is at best a “discontinuous tradition”, to use a phrase of Günther Men-sching’s I have quoted a lot. This leads to my first point, on *problems* in/of the *history* of materialism. My book which Pietro Omodeo kindly discusses here, *Lire le matérialisme* (Lyon: ENS Editions, 2020) seeks to both reflect on such questions, and ‘perform’ them, as American humanities theorists might put it.²

2.1. Problems in the History of Materialism

It is difficult to separate ‘materialism’ as a variegated early modern and Enlightenment philosophical movement from the many polemical arguments surrounding it throughout the century. Like its cognates ‘atheist,’ ‘Hobbist’ and ‘Spinozist,’ ‘materialist’ was often used more as a pejorative term and a placeholder than as a description of a philosophical position. La Mettrie’s willingness to self-designate as such, in the 1740s, is the stamp of a very pungent radicalism (however cynical and/or apolitical La Mettrie may be about “actual” politics³). The polemical dimension is present both in period texts (e.g. Henry

¹ A first version of this text was presented at Ca’Foscari’s CREMT series organized by Mariangela Priarolo, in a session on my book—many thanks to her, Pietro Omodeo and Paolo Pecere for their initial comments. I here acknowledge the importance for me of our Venetian material(ist) camaraderie in a not always-easy period.

² On these methodological considerations, see the interview on this book conducted by Pierre-François Moreau, “Entretien sur l’histoire du matérialisme”, *Revue de synthèse* 141, no. 1-2 (2020): 107-129, <http://doi.org/0.1163/19552343-14000029>.

³ C.T. Wolfe, “Le libertinage est-il une conséquence nécessaire du matérialisme? L’ontologie matérialiste face à l’éthique”, *Dianoia* 31 (2020): 237-249, https://www.dianoia.it/public/smm/smm_31_358.pdf. It is still possible, of course, to assert the revolutionary potential of ontological materialism (sublating, as it were, La Mettrie’s radicalism+cynicism into something more political), as P. D. Omodeo does, partly in reference to Ernst Bloch: “Materialism appears as the democratic opposite of authoritarianism precisely because it operates in the name of a politics from below, and can therefore question the truth imposed by the philosophical authorities or that imposed by those in power” (*Political Epistemology: The Problem of Ideology in Science Studies* [Dordrecht: Springer, 2019], 30).

More and Ralph Cudworth) and, more surprisingly, in works of the history of philosophy up until the 20th century (which attack it as a species of libertinism, or as a denial of human agency, the latter critique emanating both from Marxist, phenomenological and Christian positions). Indeed, it is hard to separate mainstream scholarly assessment from the general tone of opprobrium in what became the received, mainstream vision of the subject, from Friedrich Lange's Kantian *History of Materialism* (1866),¹ which was devoted to tracing out the ultimate limitations and aporias of materialism, to other, post-Kantian and Hegelian histories in the 19th century but also well into the 20th.

In *Lire le matérialisme* I reflect (a) on the possibility of understanding the philosophical import of the history of materialism (including the methodological challenge of understanding a doctrine through its critiques), (b) on the idea of 'types' or 'varieties' of materialism (mechanistic versus vital, metaphysical versus non-metaphysical, cosmological versus psychological, Lockean versus Epicurean, science-based or not, etc.), and (c) on whether or not materialism is condemned to being a 'discontinuous tradition'. It occurs to me in addition—this is not stated in the book, as far as I remember—that I have a more positive, less static and/or positivist vision of 'science' than some do in the Marxist-materialist tradition, in which it can be equated with "false objectivity" and fetishism.² Further, Omodeo raises an important point concerning 'naturalism'. He notes that I waver on the question, whether materialism is a metaphysics or not (I would tend to say it is and should be, in most of its forms), and points

¹ Current—and useful—discussions of Lange are rare: see notably Paolo Pecere, "Mechanism, Organization, Mind: a Kantian Legacy in 19th-Century Psychology", in C. T. Wolfe, P. Pecere and A. Clericuzio, eds., *Mechanism, Life and Mind in Early Modern Natural Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, forthcoming 2021). A properly philosophical problem raised by the confrontation between Lange's work and current thinking on materialism is that of physicalism: is modern-day materialism by necessity synonymous with physicalism? Is an 'embodied' materialism already a betrayal of the ontological commitments of materialism?

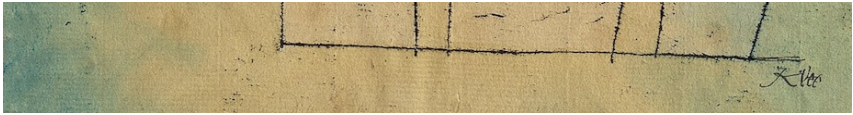
² E.g. Lukács critiquing Bukharin for exactly this reason (he calls it "bourgeois materialism", which dates the critique): "N. Bukharin: Historical materialism" [1925], in Lukács, *Tactics and Ethics 1919–1929: The question of parliamentarism and other essays* [London/New York: Verso, 2014], 136, cit. in Omodeo, *Political Epistemology*, 75). This anti-scientism should not obscure the fact, of course, that Marxism also presents itself as a science, and is committed to a certain ideal of scientific truth. This should also impact my originally rather limited vision of Engels on "mechanistic materialism"; I acknowledge that Engels is a far richer and open-minded thinker than I give him credit for in my critique of the "mechanistic materialism" concept, a criticism from Omodeo that I accept.

to Renaissance naturalisms including Telesio, which he feels I exclude from my purview by opting instead for ‘regional ontologies’ (generated by natural science understood pluralistically). I would respond with two quick points here: one regarding mere academic contingency, the other genuinely philosophical; I’ll begin with the latter as it is more interesting. Naturalism is really two different creatures, which of course can be blended in a kind of onto-poetic *chimère*. It is, in chronological order, first and indeed a metaphysical project, but second, it can also take the form of the rejection of foundations, of the kind of immanence John Dewey saw Darwin as offering him (as a way out of Hegel, as Rorty noted¹). In the latter form, naturalism is *in esse* a denial of the possibility of first philosophy, without being thereby any mere commentator or propagandist of natural science. Of course, readers of Spinoza could respond at this point that both metaphysical naturalism and foundationless naturalism share the rejection of hierarchies and anthropocentrism...(I confess to not understanding why anti-foundationalism should be post-modern). The less interesting point regarding the absence of Renaissance naturalisms in the cartography presented is just ... my lack of scholarly acumen or confidence in that area.

I don’t engage in the 2020 book in any detail with this admittedly crucial question of the pros and cons of naturalism. But it is by no means some kind of prolonged methodological treatise, either (fortunately?). After a more reflexive first chapter, the book mostly features essays on things like “materialist laughter”, “materialist dreams” (in relation to what one could call ‘non-self-centred experience’), the possibility of a materialist theory of self, materialist embodiment, brain plasticity, and new materialism....This leads me to my second point, on *vital and dynamic materialism*, otherwise known as *intelligent materialism*. For Omodeo notes that the book is missing—in his view—a more political dimension, which was present in my older essay on the notion of the “social brain”.²

¹ “Dewey’s peculiar achievement was to have remained sufficiently Hegelian not to think of natural science as having an inside track on the essences of things, while becoming sufficiently naturalistic to think of human beings in Darwinian terms” (Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979], 362, n. 8).

² Wolfe, “From Spinoza to the Socialist Cortex”. I observe, though, that what I attempt to sketch as a “materialist theory of the self” in the book is something like a general framework for a theory of social brain (their point of intersection being what I call ‘externalism’).



2.2. Vital and dynamic materialism: intelligent materialism

The book is composed of quite different essays, but ones such as these speak to the possibility of what Lenin circa 1914-1916 (then Deleuze in 1968) called an “intelligent materialism”. Indeed, aside from the methodological issues I just sketched in the first point, the history of materialism (speaking now as if there is such a history) often crystallizes around an opposition between the Stupid Party (to borrow John Stuart Mill’s designation for the Conservative Party) and the Intelligent Party. Usually, from Plato’s *gigantomachia* between lovers of forms and sons of the earth, to Cudworth but also Sartre, materialism is the stupid party. Hence it is quite provocative when Lenin states, in his “Conspectus of Hegel’s Book Lectures on the History of Philosophy”, that “Intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism is”¹.

2.3. What is intelligent materialism?

It has an *active* dimension. This can manifest itself at the level of *vitality* (cf. some of my earlier work on vital materialism vs mechanistic materialism); at the level of *sentience*; at the level of *agency*. Some thinkers like to express this in terms of *dynamic* materialism (versus, presumably, models of passive matter), or plasticity as I do regarding Diderot on the brain (Vygotsky is not far off: I mean that in his discussion of brain, mind and society, the brain is

¹ “Intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism. / Dialectical idealism instead of intelligent; metaphysical, undeveloped, dead, crude, rigid instead of stupid” (Vladimir I. Lenin, “Conspectus of Hegel’s Book Lectures on the History of Philosophy”, in *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress, 1976, vol. 38, 274, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/cw/pdf/lenin-cw-vol-38.pdf>).

anything but a passive organ, unlike Bergson's image of the brain as a "bureau téléphonique central"¹). Thus Deleuze, in *Spinoza and the Problem of Expression*, recalls Plato saying that "materialists, if at all intelligent, should speak of power rather than of bodies. But it is true, conversely, that intelligent dynamists must first speak of bodies, in order to 'think' power".² When Lenin speaks of intelligent materialism, which he presents as closer to intelligent idealism than to the 'brute' form of materialism, one can see this concept—and I thank Cat Moir for this point—as a materialism which is not blind to human *agency*, although this point may lie more in some responses to Lenin's concept, like Bloch's.³ (This is very different from the more classic opposition between labour and matter, found also in Bogdanov.) To be clear, this dimension is not really present in my book. But the essays e.g. on materialist dreams (like the *Rêve de D'Alembert*), materialist laughter (à la Bakhtin) and the brain as book which reads itself, are certainly pulling in the direction of this materialism of life and animation—and one in which, to borrow a different line from Toni Negri, the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* has collapsed.

2.4. How intelligent is intelligent materialism?

Now, and this will be my last point, this intelligent and active materialism (but maybe I'm saying the same thing in two different ways) is not like the final layer of a layer cake, a *millefeuille* which at its lower levels is atomistic, and mechanistic (we would then run into the somewhat mummified problems of emergence and reduction: is heat "just" the vibration of particles or not?). It's not as if intelligence was the glazing on a stolid material cake. But, if one overemphasizes the 'intellect' in intelligent materialism, one risks, I suggest, swinging back to either some form of idealism, or some form of animism in which 'matter' is just a name for a particular bundle of affects or thoughts.

¹ Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire* (1896) (Paris: PUF, 1939), 26.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza and the Problem of Expression*, trans. M. Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 257.

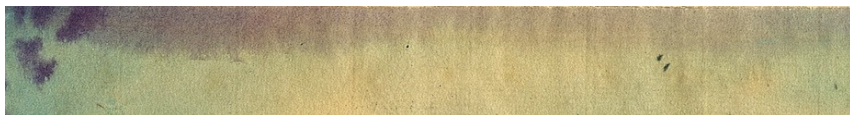
³ Cat Moir, *Ernst Bloch's Speculative Materialism: Ontology, Epistemology, Politics*, Historical Materialism Book Series 202 (Leyden: Brill, 2020), 129.

The latter phenomenon can be seen in ‘new materialism’ and the way it “dynamizes” and animates *all of matter*, so it becomes unclear what materialism would be the opposite of, as when the New Materialist Jane Bennett speaks of “highlight[ing] the common materiality of all that is, expos[ing] a wider distribution of agency”.¹ Spinoza’s *ordo et connexio idearum* which is the same as the *ordo et connexio rerum* (*Ethics* IIp7) appeals to a lot of thinkers, including Marxist readers of Spinoza, for this reason: it posits a kind of ontological primacy of structure and thus ‘vaccinates’ materialism against *Vulgärmaterialismus*. But this is not the place to investigate that option further. I would however note that this ontological primacy of structure (and historicity) marks the point where materialism can indeed be ‘vaccinated’ against either crude biochemical reductionism or naïve ontophanic animism—but it is also the point at which ontological materialism hands over the keys to the store, so to speak, in favor of a narrative of the opacity of history—of history and the present as *opaque*—the opacity of history and the overcoming of alienation.² With this Spinozist echo, I concur with Omodeo’s final remark that a true history of materialism cannot restrict itself to the realm of the mind, but must be also “cosmological and politico-epistemological”.

Charles Wolfe

¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 122—something I would rather term animism. For discussion of this point, see C. Moir and C.T. Wolfe, “On the Ontopolitical Foundations of New Materialism: From Feminist Science Studies to Metaphysics” (Italian version in *Expertise ed epistemologia politica*, ed. by Flavio D’Abramo and Gerardo Ienna [Venezia: Verum Factum, forthcoming]). The pendulum swing back to idealism is, I suggest—it is based only on some examples, like Accelerationism and the fascination with ‘General Intellect’—more of a phenomenon occurring in reflections on technology. I acknowledge Matteo Pasquinelli’s guidance here and refer to his important current work.

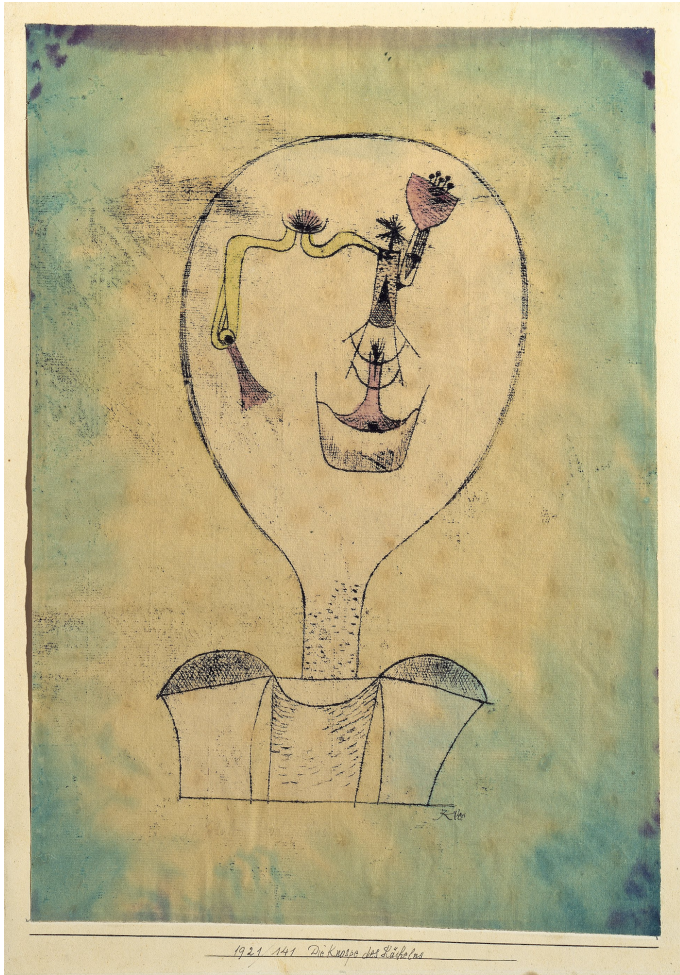
² This theme—where Marxist materialism is, from the standpoint of ontological materialism, less and less materialist—is nicely explored by Jason Read in his recent work, notably with reference to André Tosel’s reading of Spinoza and Marx. See e.g.: *Modes of Materialism: Spinoza and Marx (Again)*, September 01, 2019, <http://www.unemployednegativity.com/2019/09/modes-of-materialism-spinoza-and-marx.html>. On opacity, I am thinking for instance of Althusser’s description of Spinoza as the thinker who proposes “both a theory of history and a philosophy of the opacity of immediacy” (“Du ‘Capital’ à la philosophie de Marx”, in *Lire le Capital* (1965) [Paris: PUF, 1996], 8).



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Paul Klee, Die Knospe des Lächelns (*The Beginnings of a Smile*), 1921. Image from <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/-QHsS2vdmLVLZg>.