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Sociology and the New Materialism

Theory, Research, Action



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Introduction

This is a book designed for social scientists, and more specifically for sociologists. It is about sociology and *for* sociology: its core aim is to suggest what the new materialism can offer to a sociological imagination, and for the exploration of the social problems and topics that concern those working, studying, teaching and researching in sociology. It is the book on new materialisms that we would want to read ourselves, as we are accustomed to focusing on practical and policy issues in areas such as gender and sexuality, education, health, technology, social inequalities and so forth. Our primary concern with new materialism is as a tool to help us do social research that is both appropriate and useful; to gain fresh insights into the myriad of aspects of society and social processes that assail us on all sides; to make sense of the social world in ways that can offer solutions to social problems; and to try to frame and support activism towards environmental and social justice.

For these reasons, we do not intend to devote the next 200 pages to an exposition of the differing theories that make up the new materialisms, or engage in closely-argued point-scoring over other social science perspectives such as post-structuralism or critical realism. There are other texts that set out to do these things, and we will provide suggested reading for those readers who wish to explore them. Instead, we are going to spend our time and yours exploring the practical applications of new materialism to the practice of doing sociology – offering critical insights into the social world, developing theory that can explain human societies and cultures, and undertaking empirical research to answer specific sociological questions.

In the humanities and social sciences, ‘new materialism’ 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’. Possibly the best known of these in contemporary sociology is actor-network theory (Law, 1992) – an approach that recognizes non-human agency that has been applied most widely in science and technology studies. However, the variety of approaches now described as

‘new materialisms’ are mind-numbingly diverse, drawing on perspectives from biophilosophy to quantum physics to queer and feminist theories (Coole and Frost, 2010: 4). As the name implies, these perspectives emphasize the materiality of the world and everything – social and natural – within it. What these various approaches have in common is a concern with the material workings of power, and a focus firmly upon social production rather than upon social construction (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 4; Taylor and Ivinson, 2013: 666).

Materialism is nothing new within sociology, of course, and later in this introduction we will recall the rise and demise of ‘old’ materialist sociology during the 20th century. The new materialist sociology that is now emerging is in no way a return to this earlier emphasis, however. Instead it has taken on board insights from the ‘linguistic turn’ of post-structuralism and constructivism that have rejected the earlier materialism’s deterministic explanations of social organization and social action, and recognized intricate links between power and resistance, language and knowledge, bodies and subjectivity (Fox, 2016; Game, 1991; Nash, 2001; Parker, 1992; Rose, 1999). Among the radical claims of new materialist theorists are the propositions that:

- the material world and its contents are not fixed, stable entities, but relational, uneven, and in constant flux (Barad, 1996; Coole and Frost, 2010: 29; Lemke, 2015);
- ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ should not be treated as distinct realms, but as parts of a continuum of materiality. The physical and the social both have material effects in an ever-changing world (Braidotti, 2013: 3; Haraway, 1997: 209); and
- a capacity for ‘agency’ – the actions that produce the social world – extends beyond human actors to the non-human and inanimate (Braidotti, 2013; DeLanda, 2006; Latour, 2005).

Many of these claims run directly counter to the mainstream sociological ontology (Karakayali, 2015), and in the early chapters of this book we will look fully at the basis for these assertions by new materialist scholars. But as we begin this exploration of a new materialist sociology, it is worth noting that – both theoretically and when applied to empirical research – these statements both challenge some foundational propositions of contemporary sociology, and radically extend materialist analysis beyond traditional concerns with structural and ‘macro’ level social phenomena (van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010: 159). First, they shift sociological focus from individuals and human subjects to how relational networks or assemblages of animate and inanimate affect and are affected (DeLanda, 2006: 4; Mulcahy, 2012: 10; Youdell and Armstrong, 2011: 145). Second, they recognize that the production of the social world is due to a wide

variety of forces, including desires, feelings and meanings (Braidotti, 2000: 159; DeLanda, 2006; 5). Finally, they supply a posthuman (Braidotti; 2006a: 37; 2013: 169) focus for the social sciences and social inquiry that does not privilege humans in relation to the rest of the natural and social environment.

Materialism re-booted

To begin our odyssey toward a new materialist social science, and to understand more what the turn to matter means for sociology, it is worth looking back briefly to previous sociological materialisms. Materialism was a significant feature of early sociology, most notably within the work of Karl Marx, though also for Durkheim, in whose perspective both material factors and human consciousness contributed to the production of society (Durkheim, 1984: 223), and for Weber, whose analysis of capitalism and ideology acknowledged material factors (Weber, 1930: 183).

At its most emblematic, Marx's 'historical materialist' formulation provided sociology with a means to describe and explain contemporary social processes. Its sociological analysis focused on the historical development of social institutions and practices, within a broad economic and political context of material production and consumption (Edwards, 2010: 282). This emphasis inflected materialist analysis with a concern with 'structural' or 'macro-level' forces deriving from the social relations of production; typically – in contemporary sociology – of capitalist production. All of social life, from patterns of work and material consumption to family formations and gendered divisions of labour, was explained in terms of these relations of production. Power was conceptualized as a top-down phenomenon, exerted by a dominant social class over an oppressed class of working people (Giddens, 1981: 58; Nigam, 1996: 9; van Krieken, 1991).

This materialist strand within sociology was progressively diluted during the last century. A rival 'idealist' thread (which emphasized the part human ideas, beliefs and values shape society) began with Simmel, Weber and Mead, and led through Schütz, interpretivism and phenomenology variously to interactionism, some forms of social constructionism, and humanistic sociology (Berger and Luckmann, 1971: 208; Nash, 2001: 78; Shalin, 1990). Meanwhile, the emergence of micro-sociologies focused increasingly on interaction, experiences, knowledge and eventually 'discourse' (Berger and Kellner, 1964; Mulkay, 1985; Scheff, 1994).

The feminist and post-colonial sociologies that grew in parallel with this idealist thread criticized Marxian materialism for a narrow or reductionist focus upon social class, at the expense of recognition of the power relations between genders, between races and between other social divisions, and of the interactions between these disparate and independent processes of oppression

(Barrett and McIntosh, 1982; Crenshaw, 1989; Hall, 1996; Henriques et al., 1998; MacKinnon, 1982). The demise of the Soviet bloc in the 1980s may also have undermined the authority of a sociology founded in historical or dialectical materialism (Pakulski, 1993: 287; Rojek and Turner, 2000: 635).

For all these reasons, when the post-structuralist or ‘linguistic’ turn in the social sciences – informed by feminist, post-colonialist and queer theory (Braidotti, 2006: 27) – sought to understand the material workings of power in social fields and to theorize resistance, it found the economic determinism of historical materialism insufficient to critique satisfactorily patriarchy, misogyny and homophobia, and rationalism, science and modernism, or to supply a critical and radical stance to underpin struggles for social justice and plurality (Bonnell and Hunt, 1999: 8; Braidotti, 2006: 24–25; Game, 1991: 12). Instead, theorists working in this perspective re-imagined class, gender, social organizations and bodies in terms of human culture and textuality (Friedland and Mohr, 2004: 2), providing new perspectives on power, resistance and social identity (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1980; Henriques et al., 1998).

This post-structuralist trend has been criticized by some for privileging textuality and cultural interpretation within the sociological imagination, at the expense of matter and materiality (Bonnell and Hunt, 1999: 9; Rojek and Turner, 2000: 639–640). The ‘new’ materialisms that have subsequently emerged within the social sciences and humanities are thus in part a reaction against this textualization of the social world. However, some new materialist approaches have retained insights from post-structuralism concerning power, culture and social action, while resisting longings for sociology’s earlier reductionist materialism. However, the new materialism radically extends the scope of materialist analysis beyond both traditional concerns with structural and ‘macro’ level social phenomena (van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010: 159) *and* post-structuralism’s concern with construction (Coole and Frost, 2010: 7; Taylor and Ivinson, 2013: 666). It addresses issues such as identity, interpersonal relations or sexuality, often regarded as the remit of micro-sociology because of their concern with how thoughts, desires, feelings and abstract concepts contribute to the social world (Braidotti, 2000: 159; DeLanda, 2006: 5).

Why a new materialist sociology?

In our view, there are a number of key reasons why the new materialisms offer opportunities for sociology, and we want to set these out now, though we will revisit this question throughout the book.

First is the emphasis that new materialists place upon ontology (concern with the kinds of things that exist) rather than epistemology (which addresses how these things can be known by an observer). Historically, sociology

stepped away from ontological concerns, to focus upon how knowledge of the social world may be gained (De Castro, 2004: 283–4). The debates over whether it is possible to know a social world beyond human constructs (or even if there is such a world independent of human thought) has divided the sociological community, but has also contributed to barriers between quantitative and qualitative research approaches that appear to deal with different aspects of the social. New materialist scholars regard their own efforts to re-focus on ontology as a means to cut across an irresolvable argument between two self-contained belief systems (realism and idealism), but also as necessary to address assumptions about what matter is and what it does (Barad, 1996: 163, see also Karakayali, 2015).

Second, while there is some divergence across the new materialist terrain, the distinctive ontology advocated by new materialist scholars has been described as ‘flat’ or ‘monist’ (as opposed to ‘dualist’), rejecting differences between ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ realms, human and non-human, ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’, micro and macro, and perhaps most significantly for sociology, mind and matter (van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010). By challenging any distinction between the materiality of the physical world and the social constructs of human thoughts and desires, it opens up the possibility to explore how each affects the other, and how things other than humans (for instance, a tool, a technology or a building) can be social ‘agents’, making things happen. So sociology from a new materialist perspective would become ‘post-anthropocentric’ (Braidotti, 2011: 327), shifting humans from the central focus of sociological attention, and facilitating this ‘post-human’ sociology to engage productively with the world beyond the human: with other living things, and with the wider environment of matter and things.

New materialism’s flat ontology also marks the rejection of any sense of social structures (for instance, ‘patriarchy’, ‘neo-liberalism’ or ‘masculinity’) as ‘explanations’ of how societies and cultures work (Latour, 2005: 130). There are no structures, no systems and no mechanisms at work in new materialist ontology; instead there are ‘events’; an endless cascade of events comprising the material effects of both nature and culture that together produce the world and human history. Exploring the relational character of these events and their physical, biological and expressive composition becomes the means for sociology to explain the continuities, fluxes and ‘becomings’ that produce the world around us. We explore these issues in detail in Chapter 4.

Third, many of the leading new materialist scholars – notably feminists, post-colonial scholars and queer theorists – have developed or adopted their perspectives on the world because they are socially and politically engaged, and have sought a framework that is materially embedded and embodied (Braidotti, 2011: 128) – a perspective that is capable of use both to research the social world and to seek to change it for the better. While post-structuralism and social

constructionism provided a means to break through top-down, determinist theories of power and social structure, the focus upon textuality, discourses and systems of thought in these approaches tended to create distance between theory and practice, and gave the sense that radical, interventionist critiques of inequities and oppressions were merely further constructions of the social world. The turn to matter offers a re-immersion in the materiality of life and struggle, and a recognition that in a monist world – because there is no ‘other level’ that makes things do what they do – everything is necessarily relational and contextual rather than essential and absolute.

These three reasons, in our view, supply the logic for why sociologists might choose to apply new materialism to both empirical research problems and to social theory. We find in the new materialisms – and in the scholarly work of new materialist social theorists, philosophers, feminists and posthumanists – a perspective on the social and the natural world, on social processes and on social identities that addresses key sociological questions. It offers a means to move beyond artificial divides in sociology between agency and social structure, culture and nature, mind and matter, human and non-human, power and resistance, continuity and change, reason and emotion that have constrained both social understanding and the sociological imagination.

Exploring the consequences of a monistic, materialist ontology will be the central theme throughout the book, from our questioning of an opposition between humans and their environment in Chapter 3; our rehabilitation of emotions as productive of social life (Chapter 7); and our re-making in Chapter 9 of issues of epistemology in social research. Our intention is to provide a critical overview of the application of the new materialisms within social science research and scholarship (see Fox and Alldred, 2014 for a review of pathfinder new materialist social science), in order to assess what these social theory developments mean when translated from social philosophy into sociological usage and into empirical social inquiry.

New materialism offers a means to move beyond the anthropocentrism that takes the human as the measure of all things, and allows us to take a fresh look at the ways in which the non-human has important and pervasive effects – on a daily basis – upon the social world and on all our lives. It supplies new insights into topics from gender and sexuality to climate change, and provides a materialist perspective on the processes of doing research and engaging in social activism. It also suggests a means to shift sociology from being a form of what Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 372) called ‘Royal’ science – one that treats its objects as stable entities that are reproducible so long as their contexts are controlled, and become instead a ‘minor’ (or we might suggest ‘transgressive’) science, that sees its purpose as seeking out singularities and variability, flows and singular events in the social world, and recognizing the possibility for change and transformation.

Challenges for a new materialist sociology

Given this logic for a sociological new materialism, the consequent challenge is to establish a workable sociology that may be used productively to theorize human societies and cultures, to inform research into issues of sociological concern, and also to provide a foundation for social action to change and enhance the social world. While a new materialist sociology will need to engage with the main topics that sociologists explore – social stratifications, social divisions and inequalities, work, religion, families and relationships, media, sexuality and so forth, it also must be able to supply a useable account of some more fundamental sociological issues. Among these are:

Continuity. How is it that societies and cultures sustain a substantial degree of stability of social formations (for instance, nation-states, democracy, capitalism, local and regional accents and identities, gender roles) over time, seemingly independent of the turn-over of the human individuals of whom they comprise? What are the material processes needed to explain this (for instance, enduring mechanisms and/or structures)?

Change. Despite these continuities in social formations, societies and cultures do change, sometimes quite radically. What material processes enable social change, and how may these be reconciled with the processes that sustain social continuities?

Social divisions and inequality. The social world around us seems inexorably split apart by social divisions (for instance, between genders, or races, or social classes), and marked by inequalities that follow these dividing lines. How are these divisions and inequalities sustained?

Power and resistance. Following on from the last point, how do certain individuals (such as a monarch or dictator), particular elements in a society (a social class or a gender) or social groupings (such as a trade union or a management team) wield power over others? And conversely, how do others resist this exercise of power?

Subjectivity. What is the relationship between a society and the thoughts, feelings and actions of the individual humans within it, and how does each affect the other? In some ways (and in some sociologies) many of the previous sociological issues revolve around this interaction; but how to understand it from a sociological perspective?

'The social'. This final concept is the very subject-matter of sociology. Different sociologies have understood this social stuff in a variety of ways, but for all, 'the social' is something that sociologists have argued cannot be reduced either to

the cognitions and emotions of individual humans, or to the realm of biology, chemistry and physics. But what exactly is the social, of what does it comprise, and how does it work?

The history of sociology may be seen as efforts to address these foundational questions, with the success or failure of a particular perspective judged in part upon the extent to which it satisfactorily addressed some or all of them. Particular sociological theorists have placed different emphases on some rather than other of these questions, and indeed on what these concepts mean. Thus for example, power may be understood entirely differently by a Marxist sociologist (as a top-down coercion) and a post-structuralist (as a bottom-up discipline of the body or self). Each new reading has brought new opportunities to think about aspects of these fundamentals; arguably the success and relevance of a new materialist sociology rests upon the extent to which it opens up novel questions for sociologists to ask, and consequently new avenues for theory and research.

The aim that we have set ourselves in this book is to take new materialist concepts and develop a sociological imagination that addresses issues in a way that is intellectually coherent and useable, that asks novel questions, and offers sociologically interesting answers. Our first task will be to translate what are often abstract new materialist theoretical perspectives and concepts (often developed outside the social sciences), into ideas and tools that will address the particular needs of sociologists, and that will be our starting point in the next chapter. What might the new materialisms mean for our subject? How do new materialist perspectives recast some core sociological assumptions or concepts? We will consider the ways in which new materialism transforms the object of sociological study (human societies and cultures), and thus our sociological imaginations, and the consequences for sociological research practices and for social transformation.

Structure of the book

We have divided the book into three sections. Part 1 of the book establishes the framework for the development of new materialist sociology, and sets out to demonstrate the radical impact of new materialism on some core sociological concepts, and its capacity to cut across dualisms including culture/nature, structure/agency, human/non-human, and mind/matter. Chapter 2 introduces the scholarly perspectives of new materialist authors, and shows how these transform some of the foundational concepts in sociology, most specifically agency and structure; nature and culture; subjectivity and objectivity. Chapter 3 considers the interaction between humans and their natural and social contexts. It

challenges the dualism of nature/culture through a post-anthropocentric and posthuman concept of 'environment' that sees humans as fully integral to the physical and social world. Chapter 4 develops a new materialist perspective on some core issues in sociology. It begins by re-thinking the topics of social organization, social institutions and social 'structure' in terms of new materialism's 'flat' ontology. It then develops a materialist approach to social stratifications such as 'class', 'gender', and 'race'. We show how these stratifications are based not upon social divergence, but upon aggregations of disparate bodies into social categories. This provides a new point of departure for re-thinking social mobility.

If these early chapters seem tough theoretically, readers may wish to flip ahead to Part 2, in which we apply the approach to more specific sociological issues, returning later to the theory chapters. In this second part of the book, we address an aspect of sociological study that has become a major focus during the 'cultural turn': the relationship between the social world and human subjectivities and identities. New materialist ontology has a rather different take on these latter conceptions, and we explore this through a series of materialist analyses of social production of social formations and subjectivities. Chapter 5 explores creativity, and we use this analysis as a way to interrogate the production of human culture, from science and technology to the arts and to social forms and institutions. In Chapter 6, we develop a materialist sociology of sexuality that regards it not as an attribute of a body or individual, but as the product of an affective flow between bodies, things, ideas and social institutions that produces sexual (and other) capacities in bodies. We reflect on what this means in relation to 'sexualization' and the development of sexual identities. Chapter 7 explores emotions. We argue that emotions are a part, but only a part, of a more generalized affective flow that links human bodies to their physical and social environment, and as such contribute to the production of many aspects of the social world and human history, including social change and social stability, and to subjectivity. Finally, in Chapter 8 we offer a materialist view of 'health' as the capacity of a body or a collectivity of bodies to affect (to act, feel or desire) or be affected by biological, physical and social elements. We make connections back to creativity and emotions, to develop a new approach to health and care that elides biological and social views of embodiment and identity.

The final part of the book turns to the practicalities of doing social research and the challenge of developing a public and engaged sociology. Chapter 9 develops the concept of a 'research-assemblage' that comprises researcher, respondents, data, methods and contexts, and we develop this way of thinking about research to assess, critique and potentially engineer research methods and methodologies that shift the relationship between researcher, researched and audience. In Chapter 10, we explore a new materialist approach to social

engagement, politics and activism, based on a non-reductive perspective on power, subjectivity and resistance, drawing sociology towards social action and struggles against injustice and inequalities.

Writing what we believe is the first textbook on new materialist sociology, we are keen to make it as accessible as possible. Some readers will read from cover to cover, but others will use it more like a tool-box, picking and choosing the parts that can be used to address specific problems. We would suggest that if you are in the latter camp you read the next three chapters, as these provide the main foundational perspectives of a new materialist sociology, and Chapters 9 and 10, which explore how new materialism provides a new ontology to underpin social research and an approach to social change. The middle section of the book provides insights into how new materialist sociology addresses more specific aspects of the social world, and can be dipped into, using the index to find specific tools for specific questions.

There is always a risk that a textbook may ‘dumb down’ or over-simplify the subject matter presented. With new materialist thought in all its diversity and vibrancy, that is a danger that we recognize all too clearly. For readers seeking stronger fare, we attempt to accommodate you through signposts, citations and suggestions for further reading, to enable you to forage among the burgeoning materialist literature in journal papers and edited collections that we reference along the way.

As we draw this introduction to a close, a note on our use of the term ‘new materialism’ in what follows. We have already recalled the ‘old materialism’ of sociology, and set out the clear divergences between that and the perspectives we are writing about here. Consequently, we feel it is unnecessarily clumsy to repeatedly use the term ‘new materialist’ in the coming pages. For that reason, towards the end of Chapter 2 – once we have reviewed some key new materialist theories, we shall thereafter refer to our position simply as ‘materialism’. This will both offer conciseness *and* assert our view that the perspectives we are developing are the rightful heirs to that name. Where there is any possible confusion with historical materialism, we will be careful to make this distinction clear.

Further reading

- Barad, K. (2003) Posthumanist performativity: toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs*, 28(3): 801–831.
- Coole, D.H. and Frost, S. (2010) Introducing the new materialisms. In: Coole, D.H. and Frost, S. (eds.) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 1–43.