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NODE: “NEW FEMINIST MATERIALISM: ENGENDERING AN ETHIC-ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY”

Politics as encounter and response-ability

Learning to converse with enigmatic others

Hanna MeissnerPostdoctoral assistant at the Centre for Women’s and Gender Studies (ZIFG)
Technische Universität Berlin (Germany)

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Abstract

Starting from the question of what the politics of new feminist materialisms could be, this article addresses the possibilities of (re-)conceptualizing the political in terms of encounters and involvedness, but not foremost as a matter of choice and decision but as “the only way you can figure you can stay alive” (Reagon, 1983). In our times of hegemonic anthropocentric rule of the political (Scott, 1999), I see important contributions of new (feminist) materialisms to the challenge of reconsidering our modes of encountering “others” (human and more-than-human), who, without necessarily playing by the rules, are nevertheless agentive forces. Acknowledging our fundamental dependency as living beings enmeshed in human and more-than-human worlds provides ethical grounds for working on modes of encountering “others” that accept and even embrace the fact that our own certainties will not remain stable in the process. I propose a reading of Judith Butler’s anti-foundationalist rethinking of humanist notions of intentionality and political agency (2011) through Karen Barad’s critique of her attribution of matter’s dynamism and historicity solely to the agency of language or culture (2007). I suggest that Butler’s rethinking of political subjectivity can be re-invigorated and sharpened, in light of Barad’s critique (2007), by revisiting Butler’s claim that matter is “a ‘that which’ which prompts and occasions”. I argue that this confounds any clear distinction of passivity and activity, thereby enabling a transformation of our understanding of subjectivity and agency in terms of being-with and responding to the enigmatic address of the other (Basile, 2005).

Keywords

notions of the political, performativity, new materialism, anthropocentrism, responsibility

La política como encuentro y respons-habilidad Aprender a conversar con los otros enigmáticos

Resumen

Partiendo de la pregunta de cuál podría ser la política de los nuevos materialismos feministas, este artículo contempla las posibilidades de (re)plantearla en términos de encuentros e implicación, de manera que ya no se basa en elegir y decidir, sino que es «el único modo en que crees que puedes seguir con vida» (Reagon, 1983). En nuestra época de dominio hegemónico antropocéntrico de lo político (Scott, 1999), veo aportaciones importantes de los nuevos materialismos (feministas) al desafío de replantearnos nuestros modos de relacionarnos con los «otros» (humanos y más que humanos), los cuales, sin necesariamente seguir las reglas, constituyen no obstante fuerzas agentivas. Reconocer nuestra dependencia fundamental como seres vivos enredados en mundos humanos y más que humanos ofrece la base ética para trabajar en modos de relacionarse con «otros» que aceptan e incluso adoptan el hecho de que nuestras certezas no permanecerán estables en tal proceso. Propongo interpretar el replanteamiento antifundacionalista que elabora Judith Butler (2011) de las nociones de intencionalidad y agencia política a través de la crítica de Karen Barad (2007), según la cual Butler solamente atribuye dinamismo e historicidad de la materia a la agencia del lenguaje o la cultura. Sugiero reanimar y perfilar el replanteamiento de la subjetividad política de Butler a través de la crítica de Barad (2007), cuando revisa la afirmación de Butler de que la materia es «aquello que provoca y ocasiona». Argumento que esta afirmación impide distinguir claramente entre pasividad y actividad, por lo que permite modificar nuestra comprensión de la subjetividad y agencia en términos de «estar con» y responder al tratamiento enigmático del otro (Basile, 2005).

Palabras clave

nociones de lo político, performatividad, nuevo materialismo, antropocentrismo, responsabilidad

What is the politics of new feminist materialisms?¹ And what new notions of politics emerge in these debates? These are pressing questions as yet unanswered; perhaps they will never be answered in a definitive sense but, rather, arise as questions that keep any notion of politics and political agency open and unstable. New feminist materialisms pose serious challenges to rethink notions and practices that “we” conceive of as “political”. In particular, they challenge the anthropocentric conceit implied in an understanding of the political as the pinnacle of human exceptionality: the ability to transform and shape the (social) world. Starting from these questions and challenges, this paper addresses the possibilities of (re)conceptualizing the political in terms of encounters and involvedness, and not foremost as a matter of choice and decision, but as a necessity.

In engaging with the challenges of the new materialisms with respect to the question of politics, however, the critique of anthropocentrism, in

particular, needs further elaboration. In order to be distinguishable from other agencies and transformative forces, politics is, by definition, an anthropocentric notion that implies specific human agents who strive to shape and transform the conditions in which they live. This in turn implies that politically active agents are subjects who, to a certain extent, are aware of their particular needs and motives, who have a political will and political intentions. They can set goals and define the means to achieve them; furthermore, the conditions of possibility of such political (trans)formations are given by the assumption that the world is *socially* constituted. Political action is the activity of subjects who perceive of problems as *social* problems and assume that they have the ability and maybe also the duty to actively fashion the world they live in in order to solve or diminish these problems.

New materialisms take issue with the anthropocentrism of these suppositions, thus challenging assumptions and taken-for-granted

1. It is still to be established whether and to what extent it is justified to speak of new materialism as a new perspective (van der Tuin, 2011; Coole, 2013). I prefer, for the moment at least, to speak of new materialisms in plural in order to emphasize openness and heterogeneity. Common ground for the rather heterogeneous debates assembled under the label of new materialism can be found in paying attention to the agentive dynamism of matter and the critical reflection that the becoming of the world is not exclusively an effect of cultural inscriptions or human activity.

certainties concerning the political. The focus on the social as the politically amenable dimension of reality is perceived as a *retreat from materiality*, as a lack of attentiveness to the agency and historicity of the material. New materialisms strive to rearticulate the notion of politics as an *engagement with matter*. It is, however, not nearly as clear as it may seem at first glance what the term *matter* actually refers to and *who* engages with this matter — and on whose terms. As I will argue, it is important to acknowledge the situatedness of “our” notions of the political in order to re-imagine these notions from within and against.

Situating the notion of politics

The question of who engages with matter and on whose terms points to the necessity of taking into account other critical interventions in and within notions of the political. As postcolonial critics have shown, the genealogy of modern political rationality cannot be traced without accounting for imperialist encounters. As David Scott argues, the colonial regimes implemented specific rules in “a new game of politics” (Scott 1999, p. 45), a game that obliged anyone who aspired to political action to play by its rules. Even more: part of the rules of the game required the systematic disabling of other forms of life “by systematically breaking down their conditions and constructing in their place new conditions so as to enable — indeed, so as to oblige — new forms of life to come into being” (Scott, 1999, p. 26).

The assumption that our world can be actively arranged, transformed, fashioned — the very basis of our notions of politics — is deeply implicated in these historical conditions. Modern power is fundamentally about the decentralized organization of the conditions of life and, as Michel Foucault’s analyses have taught us, the self-determined subject who experiences innate desires and intentions as the origin of (potentially rational) political agency is a vital element of this decentralized organization of modern power (Foucault, 1982). Modern power is about the production of subjects and the governing of their conduct, in order to achieve conditions under which these subjects strive to govern themselves in particularly productive ways. Part and parcel of this particular regime of power is its drive to globally transform and define the conditions of life and subjectivities: “The political problem of modern colonial power was [...] not merely to contain resistance and encourage accommodation but to seek to ensure that *both* could *only* be defined in relation to the categories and structures of modern political rationalities” (Scott, 1999, p. 52).

For projects referring to the re-articulation of notions and practices of politics, this means that modern subjectivity is, paradoxically, both the object of critique as well as the means of resistance to power relations. This historical form of subjectivity configures contemporary frameworks for the intelligibility of the human; it is foundational for juridical notions of rights and also for political demands and

it is constitutively implicated in the formation of civil society. The conditions of possibility for political agency and transformative action are structured by modern power-knowledge regimes.

Postcolonial critique converges with new materialist critique in the challenge to acknowledge and account for the constitutive role of “others” — who cannot not or do not want to comply with hegemonic rules of the political, who, without playing by these rules, are, nevertheless, agentive forces. In our times of hegemonic, globalized rules of the political “we” need to reconsider our modes of encountering marginalized or even abject “others” as contemporary forms of being in the world, of creating specific forms of life, ethical subjectivity and sociability. With this brief reference to postcolonial debates in an article focused on new materialist challenges to the notion of the political, my intention is to stress that human/non-human is not the only distinction at stake in critical challenges to notions of the political. Or, rather, if we focus exclusively on this distinction, we risk reinstating euro-centric notions of humanity/human subjectivity by implicitly equating them with “the human”. If it is not clearly specified who (“we”?) is/are engaging in a problematization of the human/non-human dualism, then this non-specification implies a universal notion of humanity that inadvertently reestablishes the West-centered humanism (Schueller, 2009, p. 237) it purports to overcome.

This means that we need to be careful of an “effortless use of the ‘we’” (Ahuja, 2010, p. 131), while at the same time acknowledging that we cannot simply abandon the subjectivity implied in this “we”. In a way, we, who are discussing these questions in the setting of late modern academia, are stuck as and with this human subject. We are living in a world which is shaped, in many ways, by agents who presume to act as rational human beings striving to know, to shape and even control their (passive) environment. These presumptions of technological mastery are not simply idle delusions; they have powerful material effects, they have materialized in the historical ontology of our present; they have become part of the living fabric of our material being. These material effects are here to be dealt with through political attempts at transformation, and late modern human subjectivity constitutes “our” conditions of making possible such transformative agency.

This is perhaps a slightly fatalistic argument as to why we need to hold on, at least provisionally, to certain presumptions regarding human subjectivity. There is also, however, an emancipatory line of reasoning, which takes up the traditions of historical materialism with its political commitment of making visible, or making accessible, the fact that human activity is a positive force in the constitution of reality. Marx built this argument in his analysis of capitalism in order to make it conceivable that certain structures constituted by the capitalist mode of production are effects of human practices and can thus be transformed by cooperative human agency. His aim was to displace naturalist explanations of labour, resources, economic rationalities, and so forth, in order to open the way for emancipatory

agency. And this insistence that the capitalist mode of production is an effect of human agency and can thus be transformed by collective practices is still an historical necessity of our times. It is a necessary counterpoint to the neoliberal dogma that economic processes elude human knowledge and should be left to (effectively naturalized) market dynamics (Mirowski, 2010).

A more crowded picture

We are thus faced with a conundrum of sorts. We are in and of an historical situation in which we need to hold on to the human subject in order to radically question this same subject. As Donna Haraway put it: “I think ‘we’ – that crucial material and rhetorical construction of politics and of history – need something called humanity. It is the kind of thing which Gayatri Spivak called ‘that which we cannot not want’” (Haraway, 2004, p. 49).

This entanglement with/in what we are criticizing means we have to think of the re-articulation of politics as a process from within: transforming conditions through the means provided by those conditions. This leads to an understanding of politics as performativity, as politics *from within and against* (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). The notion of performativity is a pivotal concept in Karen Barad’s engagement with Judith Butler’s work and, in particular, in her attempts to push debates beyond the realm of human agency. Butler’s concern is foremost with human subjects, or to be more precise, with ways that normative boundaries define the notion of the human subject and constitute particular subjects by marginalizing and excluding others. Barad is critical of Butler’s focus on human subjectivity and urges us to go beyond the realm of the human. But, as I read her, Barad does not abandon the notion of the human subject as such; her point is to push the concept of performativity into “a much more crowded picture in which [human subjects] are unlikely to be the sole elements under analysis” (Bell, 2012, p. 22).

While Butler is concerned with the possibilities of rethinking intentionality and (political) agency in a posthumanist account of human subjectivity, Barad is pointing to new possibilities of responsiveness to “others” by rejecting the reduction of the notion of agency to human intentionality or subjectivity. Barad’s crucial argument is that “matter plays an agentive role in its iterative materialization” (Barad, 2007, p. 177). Barad is critical of Butler’s “exclusive focus on human bodies and social factors, which works against her efforts to understand the relationship between materiality and discursivity in their indissociability” (Barad, 2007, p. 34).

In Barad’s reading, this focus on human bodies and social factors “ultimately reinscribes matter as a passive product of discursive practices rather than as an active agent participating in the very process of materialization” (Barad, 2007, p. 151). To make this point, Barad refers to a passage in *Bodies that Matter* where Butler proposes

that the materiality of the body “is a demand in and for language, a ‘that which’ which prompts and occasions, [...] calls to be explained, described, diagnosed, altered or [...] fed, exercised, mobilized, put to sleep, a site of enactments and passions of various kinds. [...] [N]ot the blank slate or passive medium upon which the psyche acts, but, rather, the constitutive demand that mobilizes psychic action from the start” (Butler, 2011, p. 37).

Barad concedes that Butler offers an alternative to theories of social constructivism by emphasizing the importance of the constitutive outside, of that which has to be excluded in order to attain discursive intelligibility. Her critical questions point to the problem of accounting for the agentive role of materiality with this focus on the linguistic dimension of processes of materialization. Barad reasons that “while Butler correctly calls for the recognition of matter’s historicity, ironically, she seems to assume that it is ultimately derived (yet again) from the agency of language or culture. She fails to recognize matter’s dynamism.” (Barad, 2007, p. 65).

Butler is indeed concerned with the constitutive agency of language — but is not negating the possibility of other agencies. In particular, she is interested in the bodily and psychic agencies of the unacceptable, the dynamism of the spectral presence of that which is excluded by the order of intelligibility. As I read her in this context, her point is that “our” possibilities of acknowledging these dynamics are configured and constrained by language. The ensuing question is, then, how we can rework our conceptual approach to the domains of the unintelligible in order to learn to engage in actual conversations with unintelligible “others”.

Butler’s focus is clearly on the linguistic apparatus that partakes in the constitution of bodies as sexed bodies. However, I see no necessary dichotomy of activity and passivity or of cause and effect in her argument. Indeed, her claim — that materiality might be conceptualized as “a demand in and for language, a ‘that which’ which prompts and occasions” (Butler, 2011, p. 36) — confounds any clear distinction of passivity and activity. The prompting and occasioning can be seen as an activity, a “triggering impact of an enigmatic other” (Basile, 2005, p. 17). Butler is thinking from the standpoint of a human subject, but she is trying to conceptualize the ways in which this subject is solicited and animated by an “other”. In a recent text, Butler refers to Alfred North Whitehead’s notion of occasion, describing it as a curious interaction: “[S]ince both subject and object are animated in relation to one another, some dimension of each is brought forth through the solicitation of the other, and in this sense, the aliveness of each is dependent on a certain provocation coming from the other” (Butler, 2012, p. 4).

This adds another layer to Butler’s work on fundamental relationality and constitutive dependency, taking it beyond the confines of human relations. It remains conceptualized from the standpoint of a human subject or from the standpoint of a humanly structured world (Butler, 2012, p. 5). But it clearly contains the insight that subject

and object are not separable in any definite way. We are immersed, constitutively enmeshed, in more-than-human worlds; we act “in the midst of being acted on” (Butler, 2012, p. 8). As Butler concludes: “[i]f one were to rethink performativity within these terms, then it would be important to try to understand this strange way we are acted on, solicited, brought out, provoked, and how what we call our acting or our doing is itself always in some ways a response to what precedes and enables our action. The performative theory of action has to be resituated in a relational understanding of living organisms, human and non-human, to understand both what sustains life and what imperils it” (Butler, 2012, p. 16)

The risk of response-ability

The risk of response-ability indicates possibilities of further engagement with Karen Barad's work on rearticulating our understanding of performativity and responsibility as not confinable to the human subject: “Responsibility is not ours alone. [...] Responsibility entails an ongoing responsiveness to the entanglements of self and other, here and there, now and then” (Barad, 2007, p. 394). Responsibility and accountability are thus opened to reworking; the central connotation is no longer an imperative of taking charge and giving reasons but, rather, an ability to respond to “others”. Responsibility is re-imagined as an ethical injunction to work on the ability to respond to “others”, to take care of the entanglements of our relationalities — and this implies that response-ability is tied to processes of *becoming different* in/through the response. This notion of responsibility implies a solidarity that is not based on proximity and similarity but on being-in-this-together. As Bernice Johnson Reagon pointed out in her presentation at the West Coast Women's Music Festival in 1981, the twentieth century is marked by technological developments that brought about the “possibility of making sure that no human being in the world would be unreached”, bringing us “to the end of a time where you can have a space that is ‘yours only’ — just for the people you want to be there” (Reagon, 1983, p. 357).

From our perspective at the beginnings of the twenty-first century, this impossibility of isolating (ostensibly) homogenous human societies is even further complicated by the impossibility to clearly demarcate human individuals as separable from a non-human environment. Acknowledging the constitutive dependency given by our entangled existence with/in human and more-than-human “others” urges us to re-imagine the concept of agency. It also urges us to re-imagine the political as an open-ended process of continuous learning and un-learning (Spivak, 1985). This also means accepting the political as the necessary failure to ever achieve a definite goal; and, importantly, the political no longer appears as a matter of choice and decision, but of connection, of encounter and of involvedness: “You don't go into coalition because you just *like* it. The only reason you would

consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive” (Reagon, 1983, p. 356-357).

In a world of global interdependence we cannot avoid being-together with “others”. We have to acknowledge that in our historical present these relations of being together are, in many ways, systematically hierarchical and violent. Conceiving of this violence in terms of *social* power relations makes it possible to imagine political agency as a transformative force to achieve “a better world, a liveable world, a world based on values of co-flourishing and mutuality” (Barad, 2011, p. 450). But the necessary re-imagining of the political means a re-imagining of transformative activity. Reagon succinctly points to the risk involved in such politics: “Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing” (Reagon, 1983, p. 356). Re-imagining the political means being prepared to radically question who we are and what we can be as human subjects. This is not a comfortable task but — and this is an ethical injunction to which new materialisms add new layers — it is a necessity.

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CV

**Hanna Meissner**

Postdoctoral assistant at the Centre for Women's
and Gender Studies (ZIFG)
Technische Universität Berlin (Germany)
hanna.meissner@tu-berlin.de

Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung
Technische Universität Berlin
Straße des 17. Juni 135
D-10623 Berlin

In 2009, she received her PhD in sociology from Philosophische Fakultät III at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. Her main fields of research are feminist theory, social theory, science studies and postcolonial studies. Currently she is particularly interested in the ways that agency can be conceptualized as a material-discursive process of becoming, taking into account and questioning the specific historical understanding of agency as a property of human subjects.