

‘antagonistic realism’, which conceives of reality as a complex, historically-developed construction, in which the factual is constantly mediated through the society which confers it meaning and the subjective feelings, projections and attributions which actualise it, has much in common with Godmilow’s conception.

To be sure, Godmilow does not situate her critical writing on a conceptual level. Much more important for her is to grasp the intelligibility of the forms themselves. Hence, she provides an impressively wide range of examples which not only include experimental documentary films from different contexts and periods – including Luis Buñuel’s *Land of Bread* (1933), Želimir Žilnik’s *Black Film* (1971), Chick Strand’s *Fake Fruit Factory* (1986) and Camilo Restrepo’s *La Bouche* (2017) – but also feature fictions, poems and conceptual artworks. Herein lies the specificity and refreshing nonconformity of her book: it pushes the reader not only to see through the ideological premises of conventional formats, but also to delve into the multiple configurations that generate subversive

experiences. Through her readings, comments and perceptions, it becomes very clear that such configurations are not ready-made formulas to be emulated but particular formal inventions for specific situations. Hence, she insistently encourages her readers to read, watch and criticise as many works as possible and to invent their own artistic means. Significantly in this respect, Godmilow also calls her book a handbook, including a comprehensive ‘tool-kit’ full of references and practical instructions.

In a way, Godmilow’s obstinate belief in the subversive potential of artistic forms recalls the affirmative stance of militant artists in the periods of the historical avant-gardes or the crisis-laden 1960s and 1970s, which, for some, might seem dated or outworn today. Yet her persistent faith in the importance of developing critical awareness and in the agency of art to intervene into reality despite the omnipresent ‘capitalist realism’ in the global neoliberal society radiates a compelling force.

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## Governing the non-human

Thomas Lemke, *The Government of Things: Foucault and the New Materialisms* (New York: New York University Press, 2021). 299pp., £80.00 hb., £25.00 pb., 978 1 47980 881 6 hb., 978 1 47982 993 4 pb.

Cars that measure and signal fuel efficiency, expanding markets for weather derivatives, and ‘vital systems security’ infrastructures, among other similar developments, indicate significant transformations in contemporary governmentality at varying scales. New materialist strands of thought have been developing novel understandings of these more-than-human operations of power for several decades by rethinking the ontological categories, epistemological enclosures, political impasses and ethical dogmas of anthropocentric modes of analysis and critique. Thomas Lemke’s *The Government of Things* is a welcome addition to the corpus. By inviting new materialist scholars to think with rather than against Michel Foucault, as has customarily been the case, this book unlocks fruitful directions for analysing how power operates in contemporary societies.

One of its biggest successes is the extensive and

clear explanation of new materialist thought, particularly its three most highly influential strands: Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology (OOO), Jane Bennett’s vital materialism and Karen Barad’s diffractive materialism. Lemke provides a helpful and detailed outline of this profuse and diverse body of scholarship representing different intellectual traditions and orientations. He explains that new materialisms are united in proposing a new valuation of matter as productive and dynamic rather than inert and passive, an agentive subject rather than simply subject to (human) agency. This ontological recasting of matter’s perceived torpidity also invites a political reorientation wherein power analysis is not restricted to human communities. Furthermore, new materialists endeavour to construct an ethical framework premised upon the Gordian entanglements of people and things, whose relations are shaped by ‘mutual depend-



ence and exchange'. Epistemologically, they endeavour to remove disciplinary barriers by combining insights from the natural sciences with social scientific and humanistic research.

Lemke's book responds to a dual preoccupation with the possibilities and foreclosures of new materialism's theoretical bearings. On the one hand, Lemke supports 'the new materialist call for a critical reconsideration of matter and materiality'. On the other hand, he has some reservations. Namely, he suggests that new materialists tend to overstate their departure from 'old materialism'. He points out that 'materialism was always engaged in renegotiating and updating its agenda in confronting its counterpart ... in this perspective, materialism as a "revolution in thought" is not breaking news but business as usual.' Furthermore, he suggests that in their quest for interdisciplinarity, new materialists tend to take for granted the truth content of recent developments in the natural sciences. This ends up re-entrenching scientific foundationalism. Relatedly, some strands of new materi-

alism consider critique a limited and essentially negative endeavour. This, for Lemke, suggests a circumscribed understanding of the dynamism and richness of different traditions of critical theory. Finally, he finds that political questions tend not to be addressed directly in the new materialist literature he surveys. He recommends that new materialist ontology take a more robust 'analytics of power that draws on the tradition of critical theory and is informed by a political agenda for change.'

The book takes stock of an impressive range of recent and canonical literature in new materialisms, science and technology studies, action-network theory, and governmentality studies. In the first section, Lemke's critical attention is mainly focused on the works of Harman, Bennett and Barad, with each of the first three chapters examining one strand. Of the three, Lemke appears most polemical with regard to Harman and object-oriented ontology (OOO). OOO proposes that the materiality of matter is essentially opaque and inaccessible through analytical and scientific enterprises, and the only way to

access it is through aesthetic practices. Furthermore, it articulates a flat ontology wherein no hierarchies exist among objects, living or non-living. Considering anthropogenic climate change, Lemke rightly quibbles with this idea. A clear hierarchy of effects must be maintained so that theories of being can possibly address and mobilise to redress the human toll on the environment.

Throughout the second section of the book, Lemke most regularly engages with Barad's diffractive materialism and her three-part critique of Foucault: that (1) he does not adequately theorise the relation between 'discursive practices and material phenomena'; (2) his theories of power privilege the social; and (3) he is essentially an anthropocentric thinker. In responding to Barad's concerns, Lemke posits that Foucault's understanding of government 'exceeds a concern for an anthropocentric ethics and forms of (human) subjectivation to analyse the relationalities that connect and separate humans and nonhumans.' He elaborates on the 'government of things', a notion that Foucault introduced in the 1978 Lectures at the Collège de France, published in English under the title *Security, Territory, Population*.

In articulating what Foucault may have meant by the 'government of things', Lemke focuses on the lecture dated February 1, 1978. In this, Foucault works through an early modern treatise on government by Guillaume de la Perrière, noticing how it marks a shift from a territorial notion of government to the 'government of things'. Lemke quotes Foucault:

The things government must be concerned about, La Perrière says, are men in their relationships, bonds, and complex involvements with things like wealth, resources, means of subsistence, and, of course, the territory with its borders, qualities, climate, dryness, fertility, and so on.

From this excerpt, Lemke extrapolates a Foucauldian ontology of matter. He argues that Foucault did not propose an ontological distinction between 'human' and 'thing'. Instead, he understood the production of this difference (as well as the normative roles assigned to them in politics and morality) as an 'instrument and effect' of the art of government itself. For Foucault, Lemke concludes, to govern thus means to govern things – human and non-human – according to their natures and based on their relations. At several points throughout the book, Lemke acknowledges that Foucault does not elaborate much on

the idea of a government of things. Instead, his thinking around the notion of the dispositive, technologies and milieu provides additional sites where Foucauldian entries to new materialism can be discerned.

Those familiar with the *Security, Territory, Population* lectures might come away from this section of Lemke's book wondering about the relative absence of an engagement with Foucault's analysis of biopolitics. After all, one of his primary preoccupations in these lectures was charting the development of biopolitics as a technology of power aimed to govern the 'population'. In his attempt to distance Foucault's work from critics that reductively read him as only a theorist of biopolitics, Lemke seems to disregard the notion's centrality in Foucault's work altogether. The concern here is not that the conceptual proposal of a 'government of things' departs from an established 'Foucauldian' line of research – Foucault wanted his books 'to be a sort of Molotov cocktail, or a minefield ... to self-destruct after use, like fireworks.' Lemke's mission to rescue Foucault from the boxes in which his thought has been confined, and to continue thinking with him in productive ways, is ultimately fruitful. However, acknowledging and interrogating the material(ist) foundations of biopolitics via the inseparability of the *bios* and the *geos* from the molecular to the political might have better articulated the stakes of a new materialist rendering of Foucault's thought.

One of Lemke's central goals in this book is to make a pitch for 'relational materialism' that is also a 'material relationism'. He argues that new materialist scholarship's insistence on agency as an indisputable 'quality of material existence', and their tendency to endorse the truth claims of scientific knowledge, create neo-essentialist ontologies that do not adequately address current governmental operations. Instead, he argues that governance today functions through constant negotiation and delineation of the 'boundaries between the human and nonhuman world' while also calling on the political capacities of 'things'. To that end, governance has a strategic and shifting ontology based on understanding the complex and dense networks among living and non-living entities. While he acknowledges that the outlines of material relationism are still sketchy, a fuller explanation of what he means by it would have better guided the reader towards understanding the political stakes of a Foucauldian approach to new materialism.



Lemke suggests that ‘this idea of material relationality reopens the question of the political’ in a way that new materialist scholarship has not been able to address. Suppose the subject of politics is construed as networks or relations rather than stable living or non-living entities. In that case, it might be possible to organise a political theory around ‘more just or egalitarian human-nonhuman encounters’. In charting this, Lemke gestures at, but does not meaningfully engage with, the work of Jacques Rancière, whose theoretical injunctions inform Bennett’s vital materialist theory of democracy. In *Disagreement*, Rancière argues that politics happens when the already-existing ‘distribution of the sensible’ is disrupted by the spontaneous actions and unruly utterings of the demos.

Notwithstanding the anthropocentric biases of Rancière’s theory of politics, it proposes an underexplored angle through which the political stakes of Lemke’s project could be expressed. He wants the analytics of a government of things to open up a ‘political space of contestation, disagreement, and dissent’ that can chart ‘alternative, and possibly conflicting, trajectories of socio-technical futures enacting more-than-human democratic practices.’ However, democratic theory ultimately requires a theory of action, if not agency, wherein demands for a new distribution of the sensible can be made. The government of things explains how contemporary governments contain and rule through the dense relationalities of living and non-living entities. Still, it doesn’t provide a framework for understanding how more-than-human networks and relations can act politically to produce meaningful change.

In the book’s final chapter, Lemke works through the notion of environmentality, a term that has increasingly been in circulation, to chart a critique of neoliberalism from a Foucauldian perspective inflected by new materialist concerns. An idea put forth by Foucault, environmentality indicates a governmentality that ‘seeks to govern the “environment” of human and nonhuman entities rather than operating directly on “subjects” and “objects”’. Lemke suggests that the idea of environmentality apprehends a central characteristic of neoliberal governance, whose practices ‘seek to steer and manage

performances and circulations by acting on and controlling the heterogeneities and differences that make up a milieu.’

Lemke traces the genealogy of resilience theory from the 1970s onwards to account for the development of an environmental form of governance. It is not a coincidence that increasing awareness of the ecological crisis prompted a move away from equilibrium as the goal of government interventions. The strategy of fostering resilience rather than re-establishing stability ‘has come to reorient policies ... to the question of how to support and foster adaptive capacities in uncertain ecologies.’ Thus, contemporary governance operates through a neoliberal environmentalism that contains projections of crisis and critiques of capitalism’s ecological costs in order to nurture capitalist expansion. Environmental modes of administration can also be detected in vital systems security, informed by ‘probiotic’ rather than ‘antibiotic’ approaches to a future in crisis. These strategies ‘do not work by an external mode of operation that restricts, modifies, and contains the environmental conditions of human life but rather by aligning, channelling, and enrolling them.’

Thinking with Foucault has long given rise to hermeneutically sophisticated and precise analyses of governmentalities, historical and contemporary. Lemke’s examination of environmentality as the mode of operation of neoliberal governance fosters a fecund critical framework that can explain the emergence of new technologies such as vital security infrastructures, ecologically conscious automobiles and weather derivatives. However, it remains unclear whether the conceptual proposal of a government of things can inform disruptive and anti-capitalist politics. While Lemke states this as one of his goals, the absence of an examination of the political struggles – such as the Dakota Access pipeline protests, Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, and many others – that continue to advance a more egalitarian alignment of human and non-human relations is telling. Whether the conceptual proposal of a government of things can animate action for meaningful change and explain challenges to the status quo remains, therefore, an open question.\*

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