

New Materialism: A new way of imagination in sociology

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The never-ending debates between structuralism and constructivism and many other dualisms resulted from these two opponent perspectives in the social sciences now seem to be addressed through the new materialism approach demonstrated by Fox and Alldred in their book *Sociology and the New Materialism*. Although this claim sounds too ambitious, the writers have made convincing arguments throughout the book introducing a complex and totally refreshing approach called new materialism which in most respects supports the claim. This novelty also implies the fact that the new materialism approach introduced in this book is not simply a reaction to previous approaches as it has been one of the characteristics of most of the new approaches in at least conventional sociology.

The departure point of this new approach demonstrated by the authors is not simply a mix-method produced from existing approaches to be combined or to be criticized to prepare raw material for designing a new approach. On the contrary, the authors introduce a novel perspective that seems to come from a simulative imagination of how the real world is producing itself currently. Many features of the real world which are partially or sometimes completely ignored in other social research approaches such as complexity, relativity, unevenness, unsteadiness, multidimensionality, with the potential for creativity and so forth seem to be taken in account in this new approach to make sociological imagination as close as possible to the way the social world is produced.

In the first part of the book, the writers establish the main framework of the new materialism explaining the core propositions of the approach and discussing

how they impact radically on conventional concepts of sociology. Whether when used in theory or when applied to empirical research, these propositions both challenge some foundational propositions of contemporary sociology and radically extend materialist analysis beyond the traditional concerns with structural and ‘macro’ level social phenomena (p. 4). The authors demonstrate the main radical propositions of new materialist theorists in the first part of the book which are:

- 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).
- At the end of the first part of the book, readers will recognize the capacity of the new materialism to cut across dualisms including culture/nature, structure/agency, human/non-human, and mind/matter, and also enable some new materialist scholars to transform some of the foundational concepts in sociology, most specifically agency and structure; nature and culture; subjectivity and objectivity. The first part of the book also includes a detailed discussion about a post-anthropocentric perspective that allows new materialism scholars to shift the sociological focus from individuals and human subjects to how relational networks or assemblages of animate and inanimate affect and are affected (p. 10). At the end of the first part, the authors focus upon these social ‘contexts’ of social action, and how sociologists have considered aspects such as social backgrounds or a society’s normative discourses on behaviour as ‘structuring’ or determining the limits of, and the possibilities for, action. This contextualization is the basis for the distinction made in conventional sociology between human agency (as a productive force) and the social formations, institutions, and structures that have been seen as determining or even oppressing this agentic production (p. 54).
- After equipping the audiences with the fundamental concepts and theories of the new materialism, Fox and Alldred in the second part of the book invite their readers to re-imagine some sociological issues such as:
 - The relationship between the social world and human subjectivities and identities;
 - Creativity and how creative production is of central concern to materialist sociology, as it is the engine of social change and development (p. 78);

- Sexuality and the way new materialism questions (and rejects) the anthropocentric privileging of the human body and subject as the locus of sexuality, posing a profound challenge to the Western (liberal, humanist) understanding of sexuality, and also dissolving the traditional mind/matter dualism in social theory to explore sexuality from within an ontology that asserts a central role for matter (p. 96).
- Emotions and how they contribute to social production from a new materialism perspective in which they are considered as a continuum of affectivity that links human bodies to their physical and social environment (p. 114).
- Health and the way the new materialism breaks an anthropocentric analysis and explores the issues in terms of the flow of affects that link bodies with a multitude of physical, psychological, sociocultural, and abstract relations, and the associated affect economies (p. 131).

Before introducing the last part of the book, it seems a good overview of the middle section of the book to mention that the authors examined some aspects of social life that have often been treated as individual attributes of humans in the social sciences: their creativity, sexuality, emotions and health to show how a materialist assessment provides an alternative reading, in which the relationality of these phenomena is revealed. This analysis led the authors to radically re-think creativity and sexuality, addressing the former in terms of the capacities of creative products to produce lines of flight, and the latter as part of an affective flow between bodies and the environment productive of particular bodily intensifications (p. 114).

Reading the first two parts of the book, readers now have gained enough knowledge about the theoretical background and the core concepts and propositions of the new materialism approach, its completely different sociological imagination as compared with previous approaches, and also have learned how to think about some sociological issues such as sexuality, creativity, emotions and health utilizing this new approach. However, as Fox and Alldred mentioned, part of the added sociological value of the new materialism depends upon turning its novel perspectives on the social world into useable sociological methods for research (p. 151). Therefore, the final part of the book turns to the practicalities of doing social research and the challenge of developing public and engaged sociology (p. 11).

To apply materialist ontology to social inquiry, readers are offered a methodological toolkit included some concepts which are a kind of special dictionary in the new materialism approach which not just makes it easier to apply new materialism in empirical inquiries but to understand the sociological imagination from this perspective. Among the most important concepts applied throughout the book are:

- Affect economy: The interaction of affective movements circulating within an assemblage that together establishes its capacities.
- Affect, affectivity: May be used to refer to emotions, but affect is used in this book to connote 'something that affects or is affected'.
- Assemblage: Common translation of agencement (arrangement) in Deleuze and Guattari's work, connoting an unstable coalescence of relations
- Becoming, becoming other: A process of transformation usually associated with an increase in or diversification of capacities to act.
- Capacity: An ability to do, think or desire; in new materialist theory, capacities are not considered as fixed attributes but as properties of bodies or things emergent within particular contexts.
- Event: An occurrence in time and space marked by some kind of physical, social, cultural, psychological or other interaction by assembled relations; events comprise the flow of history and to social production and as such are the focus for materialist social inquiry.
- Line of flight: An extreme de-territorialization – an 'escape route' from territorialization that opens up hitherto untapped capacities for a body or thing, and may lead to the formation of novel assemblages.
- Materiality: The quality of being composed of matter; also used as a plural noun in new
- materialist theory to describe the range of things capable of having material effects.
- Micropolitics: Used here to describe the internal movements of power and resistance within assemblages; contrasted with 'macro' level politics applied in social science to examine social movements or governments (pp. 195–198).

Furthermore, to establish a materialist methodology, the writers set out some methodological principles based on the foundational precepts of a materialist sociology mentioned earlier in this paper. They are:

- An ontological orientation towards matter (as opposed to textuality or structures);
- A concern with what matter does, not what it is;
- A post-anthropocentric focus on the capacity of all matter (not just human bodies) to affect;
- Acknowledgement that thoughts, memories, desires and emotions have material effects;
- Power (and resistance to it) operates at the very local level of actions and events, rather than top-down; and
- Sociology is itself part of the materiality of the social world (p. 153).

These ontological shifts in emphasis inevitably influence how we understand the objects and methods of social inquiry, for instance by emphasizing nonhuman agency at the expense of human agency, cutting across micro/macro levels of analysis, and seeking explanation at the level of the event rather than in terms of structures or mechanisms (p. 153).

Utilizing these toolkits and principles when approaching empirical data, researchers will face some specific consequences of a materialist ontology that the authors have illustrated in the final part of the book. First, these materialist principles shift the focus of social inquiry from human agents to the assemblage. Consequently, the concern is no longer with what bodies or things or social institutions are, but with the capacities for action, interaction, feeling and desire produced in bodies or groups of bodies by affective flows. Second, materialist perspectives regard the social world as dynamic and relational, comprising affects, forces and desires, flows and intensities, aggregations and dis-aggregations, specifications (territorializations) and generalizations (de-territorializations), becoming rather than being. Third, a 'flat' ontology of assemblages and affects undermines structural or systematic explanations of sociological data. Fourth, social inquiry needs to be open to the potential for assemblages to cut across the micro, meso and macro levels of analysis. Finally, the posthumanism of the materialist perspective raises questions about human capacities to produce research knowledge: the view that knowledge can be gleaned from observation of the world is founded in the anthropocentric privileging of human cognitive processes (p. 154).

When it comes to explaining the social phenomenon the new materialism's flat ontology marks the rejection of any sense of social structures (for instance, 'patriarchy', 'neo-liberalism' or 'masculinity') as 'explanations' of how societies and cultures work. 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 (p. 7).

Fox and Alldred also familiarize their readers with the different approaches of the new materialism when it comes to social engagement, politics, and activism. In the last chapter of the book, they explain two main concepts associated with the contribution of sociology in social transformation- power and resistance (p. 178) from a new materialism standpoint. Then they develop a materialist understanding of policy, activism, and social engagement based on a non-reductive

perspective on power, subjectivity, and resistance, drawing sociology towards social action and struggles against injustice and inequalities.

The book shows us how the new materialism perspective can be used 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. 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 (p. 8).

Having said all these things, this new approach must be applied empirically in more social inquiries to overcome some difficulties which the authors seem not to have addressed satisfactorily despite the noticeable prosperity they have reached in terms of establishing greater practicability of this new approach. For instance, it is still not obvious how to solve the problem of subjectivity in new materialism inquiries, while it seems researchers will face this problem seriously as applying this method implies a complicated relational analysis. The researcher is supposed to explain the relation between several components in a research assemblage to clarify how the social world is producing but it is not clear that how s/he can provide the validity of these explanations and how s/he can avoid influencing this analysis subjectively. Also, the feasibility of social research in this approach is questionable. Although it seems very satisfying and convincing to consider all the aspects of an event or phenomenon to analyse their affectivity and their contribution in producing the social world in an uneven and unsteady process of becoming – as it happens in the real world, it is difficult to imagine so many researchers enjoying enough time and financial support to do social studies applying the requirements of this approach especially when it comes to cross-national and comparative studies. Furthermore, as it is also mentioned in the book, all the as-yet few studies which have been conducted applying this new method were among qualitative researches. It is also difficult to imagine applying this approach in quantitative studies especially in cross-national researches done using secondary data. Not only are there limitations to achieve data for all complex and multidisciplinary components of a research assemblage but it is also not obvious how to deal with this complexity especially when it comes to cross-cultural studies to distinguish some very subjective concepts such as micro-politics, lines of flight and becoming others with the use of quantitative data alone. Furthermore, it seems that the authors introduce the new materialism approach as an event-oriented approach that stresses the unity of an event that is produced

by the affect economy of all the components of a research assemblage –including the researcher. They have explained how each of the components can bring about a different effect and different micropolitics and consequently, result in a different production of the social world especially when the fascinating capacity of lines of flight and re-territorialization are added to the analysis process. This characteristic (event-oriented) raises the question of the generalization ability of the inquiries that can be done applying this new method. Although the authors compared several research methods such as survey, qualitative studies, Delphi studies, etc. specifically in terms of some concepts of the new materialism approach in chapter 9, the mentioned challenges seem not to have been addressed properly.

To conclude, the book establishes a very elaborated framework for the application of the new materialism approach not only theoretically and in terms of social imagination but also empirically in social inquiries and social activism. In the real world, this book first helps the readers to understand how the social world works and is produced by a complex and relational effect of human and non-human agencies and then guides them in utilizing this different imagination to recognize specific parts of the social world through empirical researches and, finally, equips them with the necessary knowledge to engage in society and actively make it a better place to live. However, there are some challenges and questions about applying this method empirically which must be addressed by social researchers utilizing the new materialism approach in their empirical studies.

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