

Graham Harman. *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory*. Polity 2016. 140 pp. \$49.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781509500963); \$12.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781509500970).

Harman's aims in his newest work are twofold: 1) to differentiate his brand of object-oriented ontology (OOO) from the 'neighboring theories' with which it is often and erroneously conflated—namely, actor-network theory and new materialism; and 2) to take this occasion to formulate an object-oriented social theory (3). While Harman initially feigns deference to actor-network theory (ANT) and its cognates in emerging new materialisms (NM), calling it 'the most important philosophical method to emerge since phenomenology,' he betrays his resentment of these popular trends by rejecting the 'gallant novelty' they have been accorded, calling them 'striking[ly] ... mainstream' (14-15). Harman's method is, first, to accurately convey the fundamental theses shared by actor-network theory and new materialism, and then to characterize his own object-oriented ontology as a 'rival theory' that is the very antithesis of ANT-NM. Taking a rather orthodox dialectical approach, Harman defines his social theory in purely reactionary terms, creating immaterialism's founding principles by simply negating the primary axioms of ANT-NM (95). 'Because of the hopelessly' flawed 'character of every form of materialism,' Harman writes, he must offer a 'resolutely anti-materialist theory' to remedy their shortcomings (126, 93). Harman proposes immaterialism as the framework we need to correct ANT-NM's three major problems: 1) 'duominging'—a combination of his concepts 'undermining' and 'overmining,' 2) its post-humanism, and 3) its reliance on assemblage theory, proclaiming that object-oriented ontology rejects 'relationalist ontologies of every sort' (98). Harman characterizes the antagonism of his OOO and ANT-NM as the newest phase in the ongoing dialectical vicissitudes of the history of Western philosophy. He complains that 'the recurring intellectual tropes of the past century' tell us 'that things must be replaced with actions, static poses with dynamic processes, nouns with verbs' (51). The popularity of Bergson and Deleuze, for example, has caused 'becoming' to be 'blessed as the permanent trump card of innovators,' while 'being' is cursed as a 'sad-sack regression to the archaic philosophies of olden times' (51). Despite its seeming anachronism, Harman argues that it's time for the pendulum to swing back. 'What [a thing] is' must once again take precedence over 'what a thing can do' (51-2). Accordingly, Harman proposes the notion of 'symbiosis'—'the central concept of immaterialist theory'—as a means to account for the multi-staged life cycle of social objects and the way to overcome the problems of ANT-NM (49). Harman's method shapes *Immaterialism's* structure; the first part is devoted to clearly recounting the fundamental principles of Harman's object-oriented ontology, and those of actor-network theory and new materialism, as well as expressing the author's objections to the latter. The second, longer part of the book is devoted to a lengthy history of the Dutch East India Company which is intended to serve as a 'case study of an object' that exemplifies how 'moments of symbiosis' transform the reality of a social object and shape its life cycle (107).

Harman argues that ANT-NM misunderstands the reality of objects because of a practice he calls 'duominging,' a combination of his notions of 'undermining' and 'overmining.' He explains that traditional materialism undermines by reducing the reality of an object to its composition, to its components or building blocks. Moreover, ANT-NM overmines objects by making their reality contingent upon their actions, agency, relations, or impact on other objects, that is, on what they do. A prime example of this is Bennett's 'enchanted materialism' in which she unduly invests objects with 'deep or spooky' powers (10). It should be noted that Harman's object-oriented notion of duominging is simply an appropriation, or rebranding if one prefers, of the subject-oriented, Marxist concept of reification which holds that, under capitalism, subjects are reduced to the status of objects (undermined), divesting them of their subjectivity, while objects are fetishistically

invested with an agency or subjectivity they don't actually possess (overmined). In any case, Harman rejects these tendencies, arguing that an object 'is irreducible to both its components and its effects' (41). Contrary to the action-oriented ontologies and social theories of ANT-NM, Harman opposes the notion that 'the object is nothing but its relations or discernible actions,' arguing instead that an object is a 'surplus exceeding its relations, qualities, and actions' and that we must 'take objects seriously even when they are not acting,' locating reality in dormancy, stasis, passivity, and autonomy (10, 3-4). Harman insists that we must shift our 'emphasis away from actors and actions' and 'turn toward objects themselves' (47, 99). That is, Harman's object-oriented ontology and immaterialism are predicated on the contention that the reality of an object consists in what it is rather than what it does.

One of Harman's central aims in *Immaterialism* is to correct widespread misinterpretations of his OOO by starkly differentiating it from actor-network theory and new materialism. An important feature of this corrective is his opposition to the false interpretation of OOO as a theory that is not concerned with humans. Harman rejects ANT-NM's post-human flat ontology which abolishes the distinctions human / nonhuman and nature / culture, treating 'all things as actors, without drawing rigid taxonomical distinctions between them' (106). Instead, OOO seeks 'to shed light on the difference between humans, nonhumans, natural entities, [and] cultural entities,' as Harman contends that this work of classification is one of the primary 'tasks of philosophy' (106). He argues that humans must not be conflated with inorganic and nonhuman entities, rather 'humans and their works are real objects in their own right' (54).

The third major feature of Harman's critique of ANT-NM is his contention that we must oppose 'relationalist ontologies of every sort' (98). He argues that ANT-NM overemphasizes relations, context, and continuity, whereas immaterialism focuses instead on 'the non-relational depth of things,' on unrealized potentialities and capacities, and insists that objects possess autonomy (22). Much like its flat ontology, ANT-NM seeks to put all actions and relations on an equal ontological footing, making all actions and relations equally important. Harman, on the other hand, asserts that 'not all actions are equal' (104). To remedy this core flaw of ANT-NM, Harman proposes the concept of 'symbiosis.' He writes: 'not all actions are equal. There are trivial moments in the life of an object, and then there are moments of symbiosis that transform the very reality of that object' (104). Contrary to the flat relationism Harman erroneously ascribes to assemblage theory, immaterialism sees social objects as developing in stages marked by a series of non-reciprocal relations, each of which is a step 'toward autonomy rather than interconnectivity' (116). These stages of change are 'symbioses' and they are 'the key to understanding social objects' (117). This notion of symbiosis allows Harman to both differentiate his OOO from ANT-NM and to distinguish it from the event theory of Badiou and his acolytes.

Harman's characteristic talent for clarity and rigor are in full display in the first, short section of the text, in which he clearly articulates the fundamental premises of actor-network theory and new materialism in order to differentiate these theories from his own object-oriented ontology. Readers will be hard pressed to find a more cogent and succinct rendering of these ideas and, in that respect, the work succeeds as a laudable primer of recent trends in continental thought. Additionally, Harman's sound objections to ANT-NM constitute a robust challenge to the vitalism currently animating Western theory. However, even a novice reader will quickly be met with the book's most glaring and ultimately damning shortcoming, namely, Harman's lengthy detour into a detailed history of the Dutch East India Company, which is ostensibly intended to serve as a case study that illustrates his claims about social objects. The history comprises eighty of the volume's mere one hundred twenty-five pages and therefore constitutes the bulk of text. Given Harman's typical capacity for pith and compression, and given the formal constraints of the book series—he

acknowledges early on that ‘the books in this series are intended to be concise’—this tedious and immensely overwritten account is, at best, a poor and confounding rhetorical choice (1). While we might regard this as a commendable experiment in form, the case does little work for the overall argument as it fails to offer a persuasive proof for an object-oriented social theory.

Immaterialism is not, properly speaking, a work of social theory. It offers a single concept, symbiosis: the premise that social objects develop a series of non-reciprocal relations throughout their life cycle which shape their reality. That single concept, while it may be a worthy rebuttal to assemblage and event theories, does not, of itself, constitute a fully developed social philosophy. But even if we put aside the theory’s lack of completion or breadth, its solitary concept seems to lack an elegance that would make it readily applicable to all other social objects. Classifying this as a work of social theory is ultimately misleading. To be more precise, it is a polite polemic against actor-network theory and new materialism. While there may be an appetite for such counterarguments in our present intellectual milieu, Harman’s claims come across more like a self-serving apology aimed at protecting his brand in an increasingly crowded marketplace of comparable ideas than an honest attempt to get at what is true.

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