Jane Bennett
Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things
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After all the supposed 'deaths' of the thinking of the human in the (typically) German and French philosophies of the latter half of the 20th century, it is notable that our philosophical consideration of what matters is still stubbornly anthropocentric. We have undergone wave after wave of the decentering of human beings from their place at the center of the universe, and yet what goes under the heading of materialism (dialectical, biological, etc.) has the beating heart of human history as its main consideration. Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* is an important work, linking critical movements in recent continental philosophy, namely a vitalist tradition that runs from Bergson to Deleuze and even, on Bennett's reading, to Bruno Latour, and (on the other hand) a 'political ecology of things' that should speak to anyone conscious enough to be aware of the devastating changes underway in the world around us. There is good reason Bennett's book has, in short order, gained a wide following in disparate areas of political theory and philosophy.

The book is divided into eight chapters, moving from descriptions of her philosophical approach in Chapter 1, 'The Force of Things', to descriptive encounters with more-than-human assemblages that question human sovereignty over the world, such as in Chapter 3, 'Edible Matter', to concluding chapters on the 'vitality and self-interest' of a new political ecology. For the purposes of this review, I will concentrate on Bennett's conception of the 'force of things' as encompassing neither previous vitalisms nor naturalistic mechanisms, though the reader is reminded that Bennett's book gains its vitality from her descriptions of the life of metal, the agency of food, and even the wrong way to read vitalism as she approaches recent debates over stem cell research. The book itself is a lively network of actants providing much to the reader.

What Bennett offers is a 'vital materialism' that negotiates the difficult—some would say impossible—task of presenting a vitalism that comes unhinged from Spinozist teleologies of nature. She thus describes vibrant networks of change operating beyond and within human beings without providing a purposiveness to the separable matter of nature, coming either from human beings (anthropocentrism) or some divinity (ontotheology). Her aspiration, she writes, 'is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due' (viii). Borrowing Bruno Latour's term 'actants', Bennett hence sets out to describe the quasi-agency of non-human materials, which in turn are nothing but the stuff of what matters to humans.

The philosophical problem that Bennett confronts is a post-Cartesian description of nature in modernity as mechanistic and lifeless. The subject of modernity lives off the materials of the world and, in contradistinction to the inorganic materials around it, has a freedom and agency that transcends its natural environment. Once we question this opposition between subjects and things, a number of traditional 'ontotheological binaries', such as organic/inorganic, human/animal, will/determination, etc., begin to 'dissipate' (x). In this way, Bennett questions not just subjective idealisms, but also naturalistic materialisms, which are mechanisms better suited to the era of Newton than the enchanting, post-Freudian and post-Einsteinian universe to which we accede.

But let's bring things back to Earth. Bennett's previous books have explored what Thoreau meant by the 'wild', a term that captures something of what is happening everywhere beyond the Concord woods. Environmentalism, for Bennett, is the wrong term for thinking ecologically, since the 'wild' is untamable as a concept that would leave it off to one side of the natural world. There is, as such, a certain 'thing-power' at work in the wild, an agency that marks the 'curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (6). The key term for thinking through this term in Bennett's work is the notion of 'assemblage', borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari, a concept of 'distributive agency' that is horizontal across a number of domains. Bennett is thus attuned to describing the vitality of systems not driven by a given principle or vertical power over things.

It is just this agency that is at work, Bennett claims, in our airfields, in the wild, in the rush of a blackout, and all around and within us (our bodies are nothing but organic and inorganic assemblages). What is crucial is that Bennett takes the *deus ex machina* of our typical explanations of the world, namely the quasi-divine human being standing over mechanistic nature, and kills this last of the gods. She argues that human agency 'remains something of a mystery' in the 'face of every analysis' (34), a presupposition that grants us sovereignty over nature even as our material bodies tell us otherwise. To ascribe such agency, she notes, risks a 'touch of anthropocentrism' (99), but she is right that without this risk of exporting what was previously considered human to a supposedly mechanized nature, we can never successfully describe non-human animals and things not merely as 'behaving' but as acting (108).

Bennett's position would seem to leave us bereft of any politics worthy of the name, and the reader may worry Bennett has brought us either to the edge of some pan-psychic New Age philosophy, or worse, to a nihilism that renders meaningless all human actions and common praxis. With each decentering of the human being, either in terms of structures or the play of language in the philosophies of the last century, there has been less a philosophical answer to these vital questions and more a seeming normative disgust that human beings have been cast from their throne. That may well be, but merely decrying this result does nothing to question, for example, Bennett's new materialism, with its focus on more-than-human assemblages. A reader sympathetic to these criticisms

is invited to follow Bennett's discussions of political praxis, the molding and unmolding of more-than-human assemblages, and see how her much needed analyses bear fruit for rethinking crucial concepts of democracy and political change. Merely decrying the human loss of its supposed mastery is not enough.

Ultimately, Bennett argues, it is just these vibrant assemblages that offer the germinating seeds of change, since *phusis* or nature on her account is a 'process of morphing, of formation and deformations, … of the becoming otherwise of things and they enter into strange conjunctions with one another' (118). This is a thinking of change without a given teleology, since nature is a vital force tempted but never fully lured in any given direction. And it is one that takes human sovereignty along with it: 'one can note … how agency is always an assemblage of microbes, animals, plants, chemicals, word-sounds, and the like—indeed, that insofar as anything "acts" at all, it has already entered an agentic assemblage' (121). This is not to say that human beings are wholly determined *from the outside*, since such a conception is too mechanistic (neither nature nor culture on her account is an engineered machine) for the vitalism Bennett describes both in and around human beings.

Bennett is right when she says that many such non-human agencies 'chasten my fantasies of human mastery' (122). There is much to be done in light of Bennett's work: to find means for rethinking agency and the considerations of what counts as living, without reenacting various forms of biopolitics. Wherever we go with this assemblage of questions, it is vital that none of this take us away from the matter at hand.

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