

New Realisms, Materialisms, (Post-)Philosophy and the Possibility for a Feminist Internationalism

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Abstract: The new forms of feminist realism and materialism could have significant political ramifications that should be owned by feminist scholars and activists as a way to create new possibilities for an internationalist political language and action that would be geographically, economically and in terms of nation-state politics as varied and as multi-centered as possible. Such a new universalism must emerge at the economic and academic margins, move concentrically toward the center seeking to provide the grounds for uncompromising comradeship worldwide. The universe it will establish is one in which power will be measured in materialist or realist terms and its chief categories will also be the most robust ones: economy and the power of the nation-state as the main means of women's subjugation.

Keywords: realism, materialism, universalism, feminism, socialism, non-philosophy.

New Realisms, Materialisms, (Post-)Philosophy and the Possibility for a Feminist Internationalism¹

Recent forms of realism in continental philosophy, habitually and somewhat incoherently subsumed under the category of “speculative realism,” have provided grounds for the much needed critique of social-constructivist approaches in gender theory. A speculative realist niche of feminist philosophy has never really occurred and it is a symptomatic absence. However, proposals for a realist and/or materialist turn in feminist philosophy have begun to spring in a disparate manner based on utterly heterogeneous material. There is no single “movement,” one strand of thought or a school of feminist realism or feminist materialism. Individual authors draw on different authorities: Nina Power on Marx, Joan Copjec on Freud, Katherine Behar on OOO, while there are also academic centers such as the Utrecht Centre for the Humanities generating feminist scholarship in materialism by way of mobilization of a variety of theories ranging from Rosi Braidotti’s philosophy to François Laruelle’s non-philosophy. Xenopheminists are pursuing yet another form of realism, one drawing mainly on post-humanist feminist traditions, combining the legacies of Nick Land and Dona Haraway in order to produce something rather unexpected as an outcome – a rationalist, realist feminism of post-identity. In spite of the differences, these individuals and movements have one thing in common: they question with theoretical rigor rather than political fervor the authority with which various forms of poststructuralist critique have dominated feminist theory for decades.² But the interest in realism and in the possibility of a universalism that would still remain post-metaphysical displayed in most of the feminist realist or materialist writings I have read so far has been purely epistemological. There is no political motivation in the texts at issue and they have most certainly not been directed either against cultural theory as such or its academic and political domination over questions of gender, sexual difference and other forms of social philosophy discourse. In 2014 Iris van der Tuin and Peta Hinton wrote that,

as well as being timely in its inquiry, the need to mark out a feminist politics of/within new materialism is also, and clearly, an ‘untimely’ project. And if we shift this focus on time to consider the contemporaneity of new materialist scholarship and its ethico-political developments, the need to address its feminist temperament (as well as the shapes that feminism assumes) becomes increasingly clear. A review of the field will show that, to date, most compendiums on new materialism seem more broadly oriented or implicitly feminist in their direction, without necessarily

picking up with what feminist new materialism ‘looks like’ as a focus of inquiry. This is another way of saying that the question of the political in the context of new materialism has been asked in such a way that, while new materialist ways of conceptualizing positive difference/differing have been devised [...] the question of the political has not yet been answered with specific regard to feminist politics.³

The interest in new forms of realism is thus still largely abstract, essentially methodological or epistemological and sparked by the relativism of “postmodern theory” as a philosophical impasse to be overcome. The new feminist realisms up until now have not been motivated by the political implications of poststructuralist critique’s undisputed authority in most humanities departments worldwide.

I would argue, however, that new forms of realist materialism could have significant political ramifications that should be owned by feminist scholars as a way to create new possibilities for an internationalist feminist political language and action that would be geographically, economically and in terms of nation-state politics, as varied and as multi-centered as possible. Such a new universalism must emerge at the economic and academic margins, move concentrically toward the center seeking to provide the grounds for uncompromising comradeship worldwide. The universe it will establish is one in which power will be measured in materialist or realist terms and its chief categories will also be the most robust ones: economy and the power of the nation-state as the main means of women’s subjugation. Identity, culture, sexuality and all other major “real abstractions” (Sohn-Rethel)⁴ will be as relevant in such a worldview as any other issue that is plaguing women, but they will not be the norm that hierarchically structures all of our priorities.

At this point I must underscore that none of what is stated above, in my imaginary new world of feminist universalism, is either said or implied by the authors represented in the collection titled *After the ‘Speculative Turn’: Realism, Philosophy and Feminism* co-edited by Eileen Joy and myself, published by Punctum Books in 2016 which I have prefaced with a slightly different version of the article at hand. What unites the contributions in a single book, following the initial conceptualization of the project by myself and its former editors Michael O’Rourke and Ben Woodard, is the significance of their feminist contributions to the realist thought and to the building of possibilities for new universalisms regardless of their affiliation with “speculative realism,” “object oriented ontology,” or other “materialism,” “Marxism,” etc. “New” here refers to non-reactionary, non-revisionist and non-reformist stances with regard to any history

of philosophy predating structuralism, a stance committed to re-inventing the possibility of a universal language for a feminist international movement of the twenty-first century.

Although there is no unequivocal meaning behind the term “speculative realism,” the reference remains in the title. It does so because the name itself refers to a certain critical event in the intellectual history of the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁵ It is an event that self-constitutes the need for a “realist turn” that will fundamentally reinvent the ideas of the real, reality and realism as inherited from the Western philosophical tradition. The theory, as well as the artistic and political practice, inspired by “speculative realism” display the need for a radical break with most of this philosophical tradition and declare the poststructuralist legacy fundamentally indebted to (if not a direct continuation of) the classical philosophical traditions, and more specifically to the post-Kantian one. In other words, the attempts toward the creation of new realisms that go under the common name of “speculative realism” may have failed partly or fully, but what is important is that, in all of their heterogeneity, they constitute a radical break with the canonical philosophical traditions. “Speculative realism” has been especially marked by considerations of scientific practice. Its project is, however, fundamentally different from that of the philosophy of science or science of philosophy. In spite of the heterogeneity of the different strands constituting it, “speculative realism” is defined by a radical break with any form of philosophical spontaneity. The latter is a term often used by François Laruelle in his critique of the principle of philosophical sufficiency: philosophy always already and by definition establishes a relation of amphibology with the real, a relation of thought and the real co-creating one another whereby the former determines the latter. The new forms of realism attempt to produce theory that acknowledges the asymmetry between thought and the real while affirming that the determination in the last instance of any form of truth must be an instance of the real. It is precisely this stance they have in common with scientific practice.

Feminist philosophy, moving away from philosophical spontaneity, was founded upon several grounding gestures that have put into question philosophy’s pretension of placing itself beyond sociality and beyond patriarchal ideology in order to posit itself as superior to other forms of intellectual production based on its “non-contingent” constitution. Luce Irigaray has postulated that speculation is at the heart of Western rationality and that it is nothing more than an extension of the patriarchal Symbolic and the language dictated by it. The “object” of philosophical study is but a reflection of the auto-referential subject. Further, also according to Irigaray, the philosophical subject of the great Western tradition of rational(ist) thought has legislated for itself the position of highest authority on matters of truth and real/ity. Although other

feminist philosophers have not used the same terminology nor have proposed the same or similar analysis, many feminist scholars have shared the claim that the subject/object binary is informed by patriarchal ideology and that philosophy has never been ideologically innocent or beyond the Symbolic and its language. In spite of the numerous and significant differences, such positions have been advocated by Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, and many others. In other words, for the feminism of the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the claim that philosophy is essentially patriarchal and masculinist has extended beyond the post-Kantian epistemic condition and its prevalence in the era. The claim is not only that knowledge is “subjective,” but also that the access to the real, to the “out-there,” is *a priori* barred. It is also a claim that the transcendental, or the minimum structure of rationality and language, is fundamentally gendered. The subject of the speculative mind mirrors the object and posits it as the real instead of the real (referring to the issue of amphibology explained above). Hysterical utterings, on the other hand, depart from the real or the physical (Irigaray). Biological difference becomes the fundament of a new language that moves away from abstract postulations detached from the physicality as essentially masculinist (Braidotti). The practice of grief becomes the material for a new political language (Butler). Sexual difference as materiality understood in Freudian terms precedes the social (Copjec). In short, the provocations of “speculative turn” philosophers (generally, all men) to post-Kantianism were already preceded by feminist philosophy.

Therefore, after the “speculative turn,” whose interests seem (if unconsciously) to have converged with those of feminist philosophy, the classical philosophical traditions remain relevant for feminist philosophy. The possibility that has been open for feminism since 2006 is to pursue its radical critique of Western philosophy without the burden of maintaining fidelity to the linguistic turn, to the dogma of postmodernism and poststructuralism and their ostracisms of the real and realisms as reactionary. It has served as an occasion to reclaim feminist forms of realism without revisionism but rather as its (realism’s) reinventions founded on the remnants of the history of the Western philosophical tradition.

I argue that Foucault is not reducible to poststructuralism, and that poststructuralism is certainly not about social constructivism. I also argue that structuralism remains relevant for feminism, as do deconstruction and the ideas of Deleuze, but that they invite different languages and methodological possibilities if situated critically with regard to the event of the so called “speculative turn.” Regardless of whether she adheres to the strand of thought that has labeled itself “speculative realism” or not, each author that has

contributed to the *After the 'Speculative Turn'* collection has demonstrated that the terrain of “postmodernity” has been fundamentally destabilized in the beginning of the twenty-first century and by the second decade of this century has proven to be untenable.

The collection brings to the fore some of the feminist debates prompted by the so-called “speculative turn” and also some that have remained untouched by it, but ultimately it demonstrates that feminism has moved away from the “postmodern condition” and its epistemologies. It also demonstrates that there has never been a niche of “speculative realist feminism.” But it also problematizes the designation of “speculative realism” itself and the pretension to assign to it an unequivocal meaning.

Some of the essays featured in the collection at issue tackle object-oriented ontology while providing a feminist critical challenge to its paradigms, while others refer to some extent to non-philosophy or to new materialism and new realism without necessarily performing their “feminist version.” The majority, however, do not refer to any of the particular currents of “speculative realism.” Instead, they constitute a critical theory *sui generis* that invokes the necessity of foregrounding new forms of realism for a “feminism beyond gender as culture.” We have purposefully invited essays from intellectual milieus outside the Anglo-Saxon academic center, bringing together authors from Serbia, Slovenia, France, the UK, and Canada. In this way we are prefiguring one form of strategic mobilization for a feminist internationalism that will replace gestures of generosity and paternalism of a “culturally inclusive” North-West. The internationalism we propose will ultimately be in need of a reinvented feminist universalism that will hopefully be grounded in new forms of realism, materialism and arguably Marxism for a new feminist theory and political mobilizations.

1 This article is a revised version of the Preface for *After the "Speculative Turn"*

2 For an important critique of the idea that newer work in feminist realisms and “new materialisms” moves against the grain of an earlier feminist scholarship not concerned enough with matter and matter-ing, see Sara Ahmed, “Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the ‘New Materialism’,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008): 23–39, where she writes that “the very claim that matter is missing can actually work to reify matter as if it could be an object that is absent or present. By turning matter into an object or theoretical category, in this way, the new materialism reintroduces the binarism between materiality and culture that much work in science studies has helped to

challenge” (35). Ahmed’s intervention into work on newer feminist materialisms is important to take into account here, while also recognizing, as Ahmed herself does, that, “[g]iven the feminist concern with understanding how gender and sexuality are reproduced in time and space, a key emphasis [in feminist critique] has been placed on language, culture, the symbolic, labour, discourse and ideology. This is because feminism needs a theory of social reproduction; of how particular forms become norms over time” (33).

- 3 Peta Hinton and Iris van der Tuin, ‘Preface,’ *Women: A Cultural Review* 25, no. 1 (2014): 4 [1–8] (special issue on “Feminist Matters: The Politics of New Materialism”).
- 4 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978).
- 5 Many sources could be cited, but a good touchstone vis-a-vis our own volume with regard to the recent advent of “speculative realism” would be *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), a volume which featured only one female scholar (Isabelle Stengers) among its twenty-one contributors.