



## **The Decline of Materialism in the Name of Matter**

in Pli 12 (2001), 33-40.

FRANÇOIS LARUELLE

Perhaps the categories of 'idealism and 'materialism are doomed. But in what name? And if on the basis of an efficacy superior to that of a name, which? By virtue of which supplement? That of the idea? That of matter? Instead of condemning them with a religious gesture, lets recall them, but merely as examples of archaic, quasi-religious belief; lets treat them as instances of the old faith with a view to establishing the extent to which they remain derivative interpretations of that real = X which we seek.

Neither their distinction nor their content are defined once and for all, but filled out and varied as doctrine dictates. Nevertheless, their use becomes strictly philosophical and autonomous relative to those sciences and politics with which they maintain relations yet to be determined once they become considered as immanent or transcendental criteria for philosophical doctrines and one of them, materialism, becomes raised to the power of index of itself and of the other, thereby becoming the bearer of their difference, which is still to say, at this stage, their relation. We are treating them here as genetic a priori, materialism relative to idealism, and both of them together relative to the contents of doctrine. We dont yet know what a 'genetic a priori is, but if it is to remain real-and-nothing-but and otherwise-than-synthetic we wont be looking either to Kant or to Husserl for its concept. Materialisms genetic difference from idealism is determined at the same time as a real, otherwise-than-materialist, conception of their a priori difference and its power of genesis. Against the empiricist mistake that consists in imbuing these categories with an 'immediate content that is in reality already mediated, it is a question of conceiving of them at once in-themselves and in terms of that which is more important than them, their relation, as well as in terms of something more important even than their relation: their absolute difference. How are we to isolate the latter? In any case, here idealism and materialism no longer refer back to:

1. Supposedly given objects (Matter and the Idea in the state of quality



and quantity, techno-economic production and ideology). To talk of matter, to designate either it or the sciences of matter, isn't sufficient in order to produce a genuinely materialist assertion, or even – which would only be one of its traits among others – an immanent one. The problem here is no longer that of a 'materialist discourse or knowledge of matter, but of an utterance that would itself be intrinsically material – which, as anyone will admit, isn't bound to turn that utterance into a thing just because one would no longer make of it a discourse about a thing.

2. Conceptual significations, 'idealism and 'materialism as conceptual generalities. Such generalities always contain a reference to qualities given in experience. They are mixtures, combining general traits of matter, but ones taken from the sciences of nature, with more empirical traits taken from the perception of nature. These significations constitute variables that always suppose an immediate or empirical notion of the real and matter in the name of the particular value that exemplifies them. They are the staple of pre-structural Marxism.

3. Meanings that are supposedly produced rather than expressed. In 'structural Marxism, 'idealism and 'materialism become categories devoid of conceptual signification yet still endowed with a differential meaning produced through the interplay of theoretical and political positions, and principally characterized by their differential relation, their combination and determination relative to one another. If the line of demarcation we seek no longer passes between objects (matter/Idea), or concepts, or even statements, isn't the immanent criterion concealed within the materialist or idealist modality? By modality we don't mean, as Kant did, the relation of knowledge to the subject and to the three types of condition of possibility (formal, real, necessary), but rather meanings or the statements relation to differential elements that are themselves devoid of meaning whilst conditioning it. Difference then becomes conceived as a power of non-sense within sense, as a genetic power of sense. But the new problem, the limit of this attempt, becomes: what is a relative non-sense or difference worth? Considered as differential, genetic or problematic elements conditioning the contents of doctrine, 'idealism and 'materialism no longer refer back to an intuitive figure of the Idea or of matter, or to a concept or essence, nor even to an ideological phantasm or fiction. But the risk lies in confusing what we must seek, the essence of 'materialism and 'idealism as differential, a priori, material elements, with the structuralist version of this essence, which is relative and hence necessarily ideal. Doubtless, we no longer invest this essence with the empirical properties of things, concepts or



## The Decline of Materialism in the Name of Matter par Ray Brassier

pure forms, but we will be reintroducing ideality into it if we continue to say, as structuralism does, that 'materialism and 'idealism are differential positions that are relative to one another, or if we continue to conflate, along with structuralism, Nietzsche, and idealism in general, Difference with a relation of reciprocal determination between two positions. These a priori differential elements are characterized neither by a sensible figure, nor a conceptual element, nor even a phantasmatic or imaginary irreality. But neither can they be characterized by a supraconceptual form of ideality, by an ideal nature comprising relation or relativity.

As far as such categories are concerned, one distinguishes between their sense or content as categories on the one hand – these are genuinely relations, and there is from this point of view a modality proper to statements as statements – and their differential elements or their utterance on the other. But this is precisely where the problem lies: are these elements themselves relative, in the manner in which, for instance, reciprocally relative positions are, mutually determining each other in a continuous tendency or becoming – becoming-materialist, becoming-idealist, becoming-revolutionary? Is their scission still a secondary form, a variant, of their unity? A synthesis of opposites reflecting itself into itself? The essence of materialism lies in hyletism, in the (structural) positing or (Nietzschean) affirmation of the continuous, synthetic and consequently ideal essence proper to these differential a prioris. One gets an inkling here of the enormous philosophical quid pro quo nourishing structuralism, as well as the super-structural thinking engendered by Nietzsche and Heidegger, and which is that of the systems of Difference: the most immediate (intuitive and conceptual) forms of unity and ideality are expunged, but neither structuralism nor Nietzscheanism, and the former far less than the latter, are able to see that unity and ideality are still conserved by them in the superior form of a pure continuity, of the Same. The signifier is in no way a heterogeneous sensible matter, it is just as much a continuity and an ideality, the inscription of a very relative heterogeneity within a form or a presence (the signifier represents the subject for another signifier), a materiality rather than a matter, a synthesis effected as the result of relativity and one that constitutes the differential elements themselves. Similarly, the hyle proper to 'the will to power subsumes the real under relations of force that remain ideal and continuous even in their 'difference.

We have been deluding ourselves: as far as the processes of 'structure (signifying entities are ideal and thus continuous) and of 'machines



## The Decline of Materialism in the Name of Matter par Ray Brassier

---

(forces and powers as a-signifying entities, but ideal and continuous nevertheless) are concerned, there can only ever be a relative materialist 'overturning of idealism. In the primacy of 'relations (of production, of forces, of texts, of power) which we took to be materialism and which indeed is one in effect, that is to say, an offshoot of idealism, there is only ever a transfer of difference in and as the Idea, a generalized meta-phor of multiplicity folded back onto the continuous, a radical modalization of thought, an ultimate primacy of ideality over the real, of Being over the entity [létant].

At this point, we find ourselves teetering on the cutting-edge of contemporary philosophy, perched on the edge of an abyss wherein everything could be once again lost. How can we not make absolute or dispersive difference – which is only a program for the time being – into an ideal or relative entity in the manner in which the different variants of structure but also Nietzsche, Heidegger, and deconstruction do? How can we attain a concept of difference that would be real and genetic as well as a priori and transcendental without re-inscribing it once more, if not within the sphere of signification, at least within that of ideal sense, in the pure typos and topos of the Idea. In becoming relative to one another, the terms of difference lose their absolute or independent character as empirical entities, but only in order to cede this 'bad absoluteness to their relation, which only ceases being relative to its terms by becoming relative to itself. 'Materialism and 'idealism are then no longer only two positions relative to one another, they form a complex or chiasmus, each alternately functioning as cut and as continuum, as support and as relation, for the other. It is this chiasmus, which the hyle supports, that constitutes 'real materialism, as if the 'materialist side or face of the assemblage, functioning as a continuous point of dispersion for materialism and idealism, simultaneously inhibited, limited the idealist side or face, and re-connected, reconstituted a continuous system, an assemblage that is necessarily idealist precisely insofar as it is an assemblage. Idealist to the second power, to the nth power. In the systems of Difference in general, materialism is only idealism raised to the nth power, to the 'andth power, infinitely intensified. By elevating, in viciously circular fashion, ideality to the stage where it becomes autoproductive, which is to say *causa sui* ('the will to power), they use ideality to confirm itself, thereby rendering the genesis of ideality and its forms impossible. From this point of view, Nietzsche, Heidegger and all the systems of Difference remain incapable of founding a genuinely immanent materialism, a becoming-'material of thought that would no longer be a becoming-continuous, or difference as a multiplicity beyond



the continuous as such. They do not sufficiently reduce ideality in the definition of the differential genetic elements (which Nietzsche, for his part, called 'active forces and 'will to power).

In other words, what we have here is merely the superior form of the old materialisms. In the last instance, it continues to subordinate matter to the ultimate possible form of the logos (the logos or Idea of matter as such), rather than subordinating the logos of matter to matter, thereby engaging a genuinely dispersive becoming-real of ideality instead of a continuous becoming-ideal of the real. Thus, in order to remain faithful to its original inspiration and secure a definitive victory over idealism, materialism should first consent to partially eliminate itself as category and statement – to subordinate its materialist statements to a process of utterance that would be material, relative, or hyletic in itself, then stop conceiving of this utterance as an ideal and relative process. The decline of materialism in the name of matter, and of matter as hyle in the name of the real. Neither materialism, nor the amphibology, the limitless fusion of the real with ideality in the hyle, but a more secret knowing of matter, one that would no longer employ the luminous paths of the logos...

From the outset, along with the tradition, we posed the problem in terms that precluded any solution that would not be either viciously circular or contradictory, which is to say, in terms of the relations between idealism and materialism. With such a starting point, it becomes impossible not to render idealism and materialism relative to one another, not to synthesize them in a continuous and ideal becoming-materialist, not to subordinate matter once more to its logos, not to remain frenetically idealist in ones materialism. Perhaps we should proceed otherwise and place the totality of relations, of their relations, on one side, that of ideality, and formulate the central thesis we wish to oppose to Marxism as well as Nietzscheanism thus: idealism and materialism are reciprocally relative, and both relative to or identical with the real – whilst the real is not relative to them or distinguishes itself absolutely from them.

Such 'relations (of causality, of unilateral or reciprocal determination) exist, but, such is the paradox of this thesis, whatever their variable content, even as 'reciprocal they belong in the last instance only to the idealist formulation of the problem, they are the only means idealism (and materialism as formulation of the logos of matter) has of formulating and resolving this problem. But on the other hand, materialism – or preferably matter, for this would not be true of the



## The Decline of Materialism in the Name of Matter par Ray Brassier

category of matter, or, even more preferably, the real (matter before the hyle) – does not enter into relation with idealism and materialism. In a statement, such relations dominate, appropriating materialisms ‘difference from idealism, but in the utterance, to which the statement must be subordinated, these relations become the secondary aspect of the assemblage. As utterance, idealism too is also, by virtue of its real content, without relation to the categories or statements of idealism, whilst as statement it remains strictly relative to absolute ‘material assemblages. Moreover, this is the very basis on which idealism is in turn able to formulate all the above points in terms of objects, statements, concepts, empirical entities, or, at best, in terms of relations that are either given or in the process of being produced.

As statement, materialism proceeds in the same fashion, issuing statements, theses, imperatives and sometimes knowledges about matter or concerning matter rather than the Idea, thought and their primacy. But as utterance, materialism remains – by virtue of its own force insofar as a relation is idealities work rather than its own – without relation to idealism or to the categories of matter. It cancels itself as materialism. It refuses to formulate the problem of immanent criteria in terms of the modality of statement, unless it be in order to affirm the subordination of the ideal reciprocal relation between matter and ideality to the real of difference. To characterize an utterance in terms of a modality or assemblage is still to reduce it to a statement, it is to sink back into idealism and its ‘materialist variants. What renders a statement ‘material – or rather ‘real – and not merely materialist, can be demonstrated neither in terms of its objects, nor its meaning or signification, nor by its materiality as statement, that differential materiality or relatively indivisible and continuous distance relating it to other statements. As far as a statement is concerned, at least insofar as it is grasped in its essence, to be ‘materialist is never a question of the manner in which it relates to other statements, but consists rather in its refusing to enter into a relation, a becoming or mediating tendency, refusing to allow itself to be inscribed within the strategy of a reciprocity, the economy of a community, into the trade between ‘positions, ‘forces, or ‘powers.

All we have provided here are negative indications rather than a positive elaboration of ‘matter as real of the a priori genetic difference before the Idea, which is to say, before the form of the a priori as such. We must simultaneously construct the ‘materialist, or rather real, concept of distinction, difference, or the discernible, and the dispersive rather than differential, relative or ideal, concept of the real, the better to uncover a multiplicity that is a priori but not ideal and an a priori that is



## The Decline of Materialism in the Name of Matter par Ray Brassier

---

real but dispersive. Of course, it will always be possible to interpret and criticize such an attempt as 'materialist rather than 'material: insofar as 'materialism, or rather 'matter, the real before the hyle, remains 'indefinable, non negotiable at least as far as concepts and categories are concerned, it breaks away and escapes in the face of a triumphant idealism, as if communication with it became impossible or proceeded by way of breakages, shatterings, ruptures, a process of continuous metaphorisation. However, this is still no more than the viewpoint of a logic or a theory. The issue is not that of a negative materiology versus a generalized metaphorsics. From our point of view, such a materio-logos continues to maintain the positivity of a logos, and the apparently nonapophantic effects of a negative discourse on matter continue to inscribe themselves within this positivity. By the very virtue of its absolutely immediate essence, 'matter as pure real beyond the Idea is by definition that which can never become the object of that knowledge taking the form of an ideality or horizon of being, or become the object of a negative and/or affirmative (materio)-logy, whose internal constitution would be the same as the formers. The self-negation of the logos merely negates certain forms of knowing: those that remain inscribed within the logos, those that remain subordinated to the concept, those placing themselves within the perspective of the Idea. Just as there is a 'matter beyond the Idea and beyond the hyle, there is likewise – insofar as we are beyond the distinction between knowing and the real – a knowing beyond ideal essence. No rational, ratiocinative or merely logical argument will be able to overcome the resistance proper to this knowing (perhaps we should write gnosis?) – a knowing identical to those immediate data belonging to a transcendental experience (of) the One – through which we know that even the light of the Idea is still relative, relative to this gnosis as to an absolute knowing. Materialism still concedes far too much to idealism, and the gnosis of 'matter, the otherwise-than-materialist gnosis of the dispersive real, must be sought beyond materialism and beyond the hyle. It is a supplement for materialism as such, but a supplement of matter rather than of materialism, and a supplement of the real rather than of matter, consonant with a new interpretation of the 'veritas transcendentalis. Another Kehre? A new turning beyond the Ideas accomplished form as presence, 'will to power and 'Eternal recurrence, Being? Certainly not a turning ... Only the path of the Idea, of Being, of ontological ideality, knows and tolerates such turnings. We seek a multiplicity beyond essence, one as dis-continuous, as un-Nietzschean, as possible ... one that is immediately given.



## The Decline of Materialism in the Name of Matter par Ray Brassier

---

\* This essay was originally published in François Laruelle, *Le Principe de Minorité* (Paris, Aubier Montaigne, 1981). We thank the author and the publisher for allowing us to print it here in translation.

Ray Brassier