
New Materialisms, Familiar Challenges

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FOR SOME TIME NOW, scholars in the humanities have called for a more-than-human approach to analyzing and narrating the past. In recent years, research endeavors have mushroomed: scholars have considered the historical significance of everything from fungi to flies to copper filaments. To do so, they are drawing on theory and empirical findings from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. There is no shortage of neologisms, including New Materialism.

What are some of the implications of this scholarly foment for writing histories of agriculture?

Before diving into this question, I should note that I can readily imagine some agricultural historians scratching—or perhaps shaking—their heads over this question. How can “agricultural history” be anything but materialist? In fact, a perusal of article titles from the first decade (1927–37) of *Agricultural History* finds authors addressing topics like cattle breeds, copper-based fungicides, grain elevators, grain drills, long-distance plant introductions, grasshopper plagues, and Hugh Nicol’s 1936 gem titled “The Two Ends of Straw”—how much more material can one get?

My rather obvious point is that the study of material things in agricultural history is not terribly new. I think that there are three things that distinguish recent efforts to rematerialize agricultural history. The key analytical move is a recasting of organisms and nonliving things, transforming them from eminently manipulable props into coproducers of historical change. In other words, a cow or a copper fungicide ceases to be an “input” in a farming system and becomes an actor (of sorts) capable of driving change via interactions with other components of the “assemblage”—a neologism that conveys a second hallmark of the New Materialism: an emphasis on contingency over fixed structures. Finally, practitioners of the New Materialism show a willingness to look beyond the forces of capitalism, plunging into deep histories of mineral formations, plant and animal domestications, and climate change.

In addition to thinking about finance capitalism or merchant capitalism, we might do well to consider “livestock capitalisms” or “carbon capitalisms,” since it matters quite a bit that capitalists like to celebrate their winnings by driving fancy cars and eating steak dinners.

Timothy J. LeCain notes that his approach to New Materialism draws inspiration from Donald Worster who, of course, has played a leading role in integrating agroecological principles in agricultural/environmental histories.¹ Over the past two decades, agroecology has continued to influence historical scholarship on farming, posing new epistemic and ethical questions that emerged alongside what Raj Patel has called the “Long Green Revolution.”² New Materialism builds on, and extends in promising new ways, agroecological histories that pose alternative, socio-ecological forms of valuation.

Consider the concept of “yield.” If we can trust the folks at the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary*, the use of the word *yield* to refer to crop production dates to the fifteenth century. *Yield* derived from *geld*, whose now “obsolete” meaning was a payment of taxes, tributes, or fines. Leaving aside the tantalizing connections between the etymology of *yield*, the rise of plantation economies, and a notion that soils must “yield” bounty to the people who worked it, I would argue that histories of modern agriculture continue to revolve around the causes and consequences of rising yields, including mass urbanization and government food policies designed to keep food costs low for urban-based working classes. In other words, many historical “metanarratives” embraced by progressive as well as less progressive historians rest on unquestioned assumptions about the causes (and benefits) of the productivity of a rather small number of grain crops.

My point here is not to deny the historical significance of agricultural intensification. The problem is that yield functions as the “gross domestic product” of agriculture: it’s a quantitative measure that conceals at least as much as it reveals about the myriad life forms that make up farming. Yield or “productivity” functions to conceal power dynamics and inequalities while lending a technoscientific precision to evaluating farming systems against the “gold standard” of monocultures. For historians of agriculture, New Materialisms offer a way to begin to approach farming as something other than a “sector” that yields goods for “the economy”;³ it is a means to center on the reproduction of life forms. To put it in Worsterian terms, new materialist approaches to histories of agriculture are grounded in agroecology, not agronomy.⁴

My sense is that New Materialism is deeply influenced by the present moment. Scholarly interest in granting power to other-than-human things is

cresting precisely when many people are fearful of large-scale, anthropogenic climate change and its implications for nearly everything, including how writers narrate the past. Unsurprisingly, triumphant tales of fossil-fuel driven, technological “advances” have given way to far more unsettled and unsettling narratives. The very symbol of industrialization—the steam engine—is now looked on with bitter irony, recast as the epitome of the self-reinforcing logic of productionism: an early steam engine pumping water out of a mine pit to permit the extraction of more coal needed to power the steam engine. (Of course, engines would become more “efficient,” but that only coincided with increased consumption of fossil fuels.) Neo-materialism, then, is a pushback of sorts against assumptions that people will engineer their way out of large-scale, ecological calamity.

The shift toward the New Materialism is therefore both epistemic and ethical, empirical and political. There is compelling, if not overwhelming, empirical evidence—assembled by a wide range of disciplines—indicating that societies driven by fossil fuels and high-input agriculture are neither sustainable nor just. One political implication—and this is a biggie—is that government policies that seek to redistribute wealth (be it in the form of money or bags of wheat) are insufficient to achieve long-term environmental/climate justice. A focus on monetary reparations without strengthening the means of socio-ecological reproduction is likely to provide only short-term victories.

There is much in the New Materialism to empower agricultural history to challenge the privileged positions of political or military histories, and to engage with theorists of societal transformations.⁵ Given this potential, I want to suggest that new materialists avoid defining themselves in opposition to cultural or intellectual histories. Instead, I think a more creative approach would be to produce histories that tightly weave materialism with ideational forces. Here I draw inspiration from the late anthropologist Sidney Mintz’s book *Sweetness and Power*, which linked the rise of sugar consumption in Europe to the enslavement of Africans on Caribbean plantations.⁶ On the one hand, his approach anticipated neo-materialism: he took seriously the idea that humans (and other creatures) might be predisposed to eat sweet-tasting things. This insight is helpful for appreciating the near-global circulation of sugarcane in the modern world and the long march of Coca-Cola. Mintz, however, instructively identified several other sources of sweetness (e.g., honey, sorghums, tree saps, corn syrup) utilized by people living in different times and places. He then sought to explain, largely by drawing on class dynamics and social relations among people, the rise of sugarcane-derived sucrose as the dominant form of sweetener in nineteenth- and early

twentieth-century Europe. Scholars continue to debate his arguments about social class and consumption practices, but Mintz's insights that production and consumption are interrelated, and that the meanings of consumption are themselves powerful, remain important for writing histories of agriculture.⁷

In my research on the exploitation of animals in southern Patagonia for furs and fibers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I draw on Mintz when trying to understand the interplay of genetics (i.e., selective breeding), socio-ecological conditions (i.e., the particularity of places), and mass markets for textiles (i.e., fashion). By taking the material qualities of animal fibers seriously, I somewhat paradoxically have had to confront shifting ideas about quality and valuation. For example, the material qualities of the hair or fiber from a guanaco (a South American camelid related to alpacas) are different from those of a Lincoln sheep, which are also different from those of a Corriedale sheep. Twentieth-century industrial researchers spent considerable amounts of energy studying and describing in great detail the material qualities of these fibers. This kind of material approach can tell us something important (maybe: "softness and power"?), but it tells us very little about why particular fibers were valued differently, at different times and in distinct places.

I want to stress that I am not talking about an ideational "superstructure" but, rather, commodification as a coproduction of the material and the imaginary: fashion trends gave market value to certain material fiber qualities.⁸ Fashion in turn is very much about materiality, and textile manufacturers constantly experimented with blending fibers. Finally, fashion is also about social marking: dress signals gender, class, age, generation, politics. It can even be a marker of personhood: the "primitivity" of guanaco fur-clad Indigenous foragers and hunters in Tierra del Fuego became a marker of their "uncivilized" condition and helped justify their violent removal from grasslands that would nourish the sheep that simultaneously produced fibers and embodied Christian civilization.

To convey this suggestion in a more generalized way: agricultural historians need to find ways to narrate histories that acknowledge the contradictions that result from actors who are at once humans and persons.⁹ New Materialist interpretations of the past that privilege an ecologically formed "human" at the expense of the socially constructed "person" ignore powerful forces in history—religion, ethno-nationalisms, and racism—and are unlikely to inspire collective political action.

A historical narrative is a coproduction of author and intended audience: I write for particular people, not things or other-than-human species. As

people/humans inhabiting worlds built largely, but not entirely, by the massive exploitation of both material things and humans denied personhood, historians must stay with the troubling contradictions of our tight-knit worlds.

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Notes

1. LeCain, *Matter of History*.
2. Patel, "Long Green Revolution."
3. Mitchell, "Rethinking Economy."
4. Worster, "Transformations of the Earth."
5. Hamilton, "Theory and Theorizing in Agricultural History."
6. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*.
7. Norton, "Tasting Empire."
8. Sewell, "Empire of Fashion."
9. Ingold, "Humanity and Animality."

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