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# The Uses and Limits of Materialist Approaches

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I THINK OF THE NEW MATERIALISM as a commitment to the idea that non-human forces are significant drivers of historical change and that human institutions, societies, and even identities are embedded in the nonhuman world. This is more than saying that nonhuman forces shape history, more than merely saying that an earthquake or typhoon can shape human events. Rather, it is the view that all sorts of things we take to be fundamentally human or social—things like capitalism or colonialism—become possible or gain meaning only through their emergence from, or dialogue with, the nonhuman world. In this sense, materialism is ecological. It is focused on the webs of relationships—human and nonhuman—that underpin human society.

Trying to find and understand these relationships is a way of approaching history that has been enormously useful to me, both in helping me tell new stories and rethink familiar ones. Below are some concrete ways materialism has enriched my work. Where possible, I also try to provide some practical ideas on how one can integrate materialist approaches into their own work.

In my first book, I wanted to tell a big story—beef in America. All of it. Or as much as I could. The problem when I was conceptualizing the project was how to frame it: Should I narrate the rise of the Chicago meatpackers? Focus primarily on the perspective of one key cattle ranch? Maybe focus on a few important characters? I wanted to provide a kaleidoscopic view, but I had no idea how to keep it together.

I had been reading a lot of commodity history, agricultural history, and environmental history, including works by the others on this roundtable, and what I liked was how they focused on the process of making or doing things, especially at the interface of the human and the nonhuman. So I asked myself: What processes helped put (and keep) beef on the American table? How did an individual piece of meat or an individual animal become transformed into an abstract commodity? What relationships maintained

that abstraction and what forces undermined it? By focusing on the material, I had no choice but to start on the ground and build up my story from there. The material production of beef as a commodity gave me a through line to analyze the power of a diverse range of actors and forces.

I focused on beef as if it had historical power. What forces—human and nonhuman—made that possible? What I found is that the changing of the seasons, the vagaries of animal disease, the specifics of animal bodies and behavior, and even the cultural meanings of ranch labor all became critical parts of that story. Counterintuitively, for an approach opposed to anthropocentrism, materialism also allowed me to tell a big story that was fundamentally human. This was a story on the ground, and although humans were far from the only key actors, it was a vantage from which human consequences and meanings were never far out of view.

Materialism also helps avoid another risk of big stories: naturalizing institutions or practices. When we talk about something like “the market,” there is a temptation to move to abstractions. This is understandable; how else can we talk about continent-spanning processes? But when we talk about something that big, it can begin to seem inevitable. There’s a temptation to overemphasize uniformity and presuppose stability. On the ground, you find neither; things are more varied than they seemed, and everything is in flux.

Materialist approaches can help think this through. First, focusing on a broader range of historical agents reveals the invisible forces sustaining or shaping these institutions. This can be, for instance, the animal labor—chiefly horses—that made a national market possible in the nineteenth century. Further, by emphasizing institutions as embedded in ecologies, materialism helps show how abstractions build up from concrete instantiations. The grading of wheat, for example, emerged from the climatic conditions of the American Midwest, agricultural knowledge, and the on-the-ground dynamics of the struggle between grain elevator owners, railroads, and farmers. From this web of interactions emerged the abstractions of the American commodity market. By building up from the ecological, and broadening the range of historical actors, materialist approaches help denaturalize historical abstractions. It’s an approach that helps show how these institutions evolve or even collapse.

Despite its power, materialism has its limits. It can help one puzzle through a complicated story, but in de-emphasizing the human, it has less to say about what that story might mean (which is, after all, a deeply human concern). Materialist thinking, then, is most powerful when put in dialogue

with other approaches, especially cultural history. This can be either within the historiographic conversation or in one's thoughts.

Take the history of the Texas Longhorn. For many Americans, the longhorn symbolizes an unsettled and exciting past, an imagined world that was at once wild and tamed. But when I started to study the longhorn from a materialist perspective, I found something odd. The longhorn was a product of human history, the adaptations of its body reflecting the economic and social system in which it had been embedded. Further, during its nineteenth-century heyday, the longhorn was big business, not a relic of some bygone period of American capitalism.

There was a gap between my materialist account of the longhorn and its mythology. But it would be a mistake to view the materialist story as the "correct" one. The myth of the longhorn had real meaning and power. The key was to explore the gap between the two. What was the ideological work of the longhorn myth? Why did the two accounts look so different? And turning the methods of cultural history back on my own account: what was the ideological work of my materialist retelling of the breed's history?

Materialist history and cultural history ask different questions and provide different answers. The key is to put them in dialogue. A materialist retelling of a familiar story provides exciting insights not because it is somehow more correct or complete, but because it provides a point of contrast with what we thought we knew. The opposite is true as well: if you are all in on the materialist approach, you should always bring in approaches better able to address key questions of meaning.

Perhaps better than anyone, agricultural historians have shown how human history has been made in and through the nonhuman world. Materialist approaches take a similar tack but expand the range of things to which we apply this insight. What if, in addition to soils or crops, we think of gold or copper as the foundation of human power structures? In many ways this approach is not exactly new. But in a way, the ambition is new; materialist approaches show us how all historians can and should think ecologically.

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