



REVIEW

Thomas Lemke, *The Government of Things: Foucault and the New Materialisms*. New York: NYU Press, 2021. Pp. 312. ISBN: 9781479829934 (paperback).

Thomas Lemke's *The Government of Things* offers an important set of reflections on the continuing pertinence of Foucault's concept of government in light of the increasing visibility of problems of materiality, the ecological, and the nonhuman. Lemke has rightfully earned a position as one of the foremost interpreters of Foucault's writings on power in the 1970s, and he is well placed to stage the series of critical encounters in this text. The reader is immediately struck by the breadth of citations and the depth of engagement with various strains of contemporary debates over the amorphous category of "new materialism" that have arisen over the past two decades. He proceeds in three main parts: first, a critical review of three major strands of new materialism, second, a creative reworking of Foucauldian concepts, and third, an articulation of Lemke's concept of the 'government of things' as a new analytic frame for grappling with contemporary political problems broached by new materialists.

In Part I, Lemke addresses three currents in a loosely associated philosophical movement now known collectively as new materialism. Lemke first approaches "object-oriented ontology" (OOO) with a focus on the most famous proponent of OOO, Graham Harman. As he does throughout this book, Lemke marshals an impressive array of recent secondary literature, and in the case of OOO to facilitate a withering critique. Lemke has some sympathy for OOO's central criticism of subject-centered philosophies' tendency to overstate the knowledge of objects available to human subjects (p. 33). His diagnosis of OOO's potential contribution to social sciences is quite grim, and he portrays a predilection for a kind of mystifying attachment to the unknowability of objects as they withdraw from what is disclosed in their relations to human beings and a fascination with the irreducible "strangeness" of objects (p. 27). The ironic result is a subjectivism at the heart of OOO that reifies the subject-object distinction to define this relation by an aesthetic experience of "surprising weirdness" while avoiding adequate discussion of hierarchical relations established among various objects and human beings (p. 36).

Lemke is more optimistic regarding the second variant of new materialism under consideration, which he labels "vital materialism" and associates closely with the work of Jane Bennett. The basic approach of vital materialism, in Lemke's telling, is to prioritize analysis of the myriad relations between human and nonhuman entities in assemblages

with emergent properties that are irreducible to the purposive agency of humans. In comparison with OOO, Lemke argues that vital materialism is “helpful in displacing liberal accounts of individual self-determination on the one hand and OOO’s focus on the autonomy of isolated objects on the other” (p. 47). Lemke harbors concern, however, that Bennett’s focus on “thing-power” risks an essentializing move that posits an ineradicable vital force possessed by things before any relation, which both flattens the differences between variously hierarchized entities and conflicts with Bennett’s otherwise relation-centric account of assemblages (p. 50, p. 54-55). Beyond these ontological problems, Lemke argues that vital materialism in Bennett evacuates transformative political possibilities, and instead calls only for developing ethical sensibilities more disposed to altered practices of consumption. Lemke goes so far as to argue that Bennett ultimately winds up providing “an alternative to politics” (p. 56) entirely, a point that I will return to shortly.

Lemke then pivots to what he terms “diffractive materialism” represented by the work of Karen Barad. This strand of new materialism emphasizes the performative and relational “intra-activity” of matter before any stable difference between human and nonhuman can be established (p. 60-61). Lemke lauds this approach for enabling a more direct theorization of power than the other strands of new materialism, specifically in providing a view of power as practically cohering in concrete apparatuses “as part and product of processes of differential materializations” (p. 71). Concerns with this approach soon follow, however, and Lemke argues that diffractive materialism in the work of Karen Barad risks too quickly embracing quantum mechanics as a quasi-scientific foundation for new materialism (p. 73). As with Bennett’s work, Lemke also finds the notion of “ethical responsibility” in Barad’s work to be a faulty way of access to political considerations, leaving it unclear how struggle over entrenched power structures can be adequately theorized in a nebulous, “never-ending flow of agentic possibilities” (p. 77). Lemke thus ends his review of new materialism with a serious concern for a deficit in political analysis in this burgeoning movement, and he turns to Foucault to recenter “ontological politics” (p. 78).

Part II provides Lemke a platform to review three concepts in Foucault to probe their relevance for contemporary social concerns raised in his review of new materialist literature. In dedicating a chapter each to Foucault’s concepts of “dispositive”, “technology”, and “milieu”, Lemke draws out “elements of new materialist thought” (p. 80) in Foucault that lead to unexpected resonances with contemporary materialisms. Lemke’s discussion of the concept of “dispositives” in chapter four fruitfully reintroduces nonhuman materiality into a central technical term of Foucault’s work on governmentality. In Lemke’s telling, the notion of dispositive can be shown to stress the ontological heterogeneity of human/nonhuman components included in dispositives, the “technological” capacity of dispositives to engender effects greater than the sum of their parts, and the strategic orientation of dispositives to respond to given problems of government and recalibrate in the wake of contingencies (p. 92-95). Lemke takes a similar approach to the concept of “technology” in chapter five, interpreting the term as designating for Foucault a mode of calculating and enmeshing networks of persons and things (p. 107-110). Lemke makes clear that these coordinated networks are not tools for foreclosing or forcing certain actions to

happen; instead, they are best understood as calculated strategies for letting a range of things happen which allow for and take up dynamic processes of self-organization in a given sphere of human/nonhuman interaction (p. 115-116). Lemke rounds out his reappraisal of Foucauldian concepts with a discussion of the notion of “milieu” in chapter six. The idea of “milieu” takes on a prominent role in articulating “the link between a naturally given space and an artificially constructed space,” and conceiving of the generative ground of circulations (of people, money, air, water, etc.) that become targets for government activity to affect populations (p. 130, p. 136). A particular strength of this chapter lies in Lemke’s emphasis on the concept of milieu for breaking biopolitical analyses out of a strictly anthropocentric framing and moving toward a “more-than-human biopolitics” that accounts for both historical practices of biopolitical control and the emergence of various configurations of the human conditioned by “nonhuman doings” (p. 136-137). Arguing against both Foucault scholars championing an account of biopolitics explicitly tethered to humans alone (Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose) and critics of Foucault who see no room for the nonhuman in biopolitical analyses (Donna Haraway), Lemke charts an alternative approach to biopolitics rooted in human material dependence on milieux that they can never transcend. Taken together with his examination of “dispositives” and “technologies”, Lemke presents a prism-like constellation of related concepts that furnish resources for elaborating central themes in Foucault’s work in surprising directions.

In Part III, Lemke shifts his focus in order to advance an analytic of “the government of things” that takes the reader beyond both Foucault and new materialism. To make this move, Lemke first takes inspiration from theorists in science and technology studies (STS) to develop practice-oriented relational ontologies of things (including humans) to be governed, putting forward “an alternative view of agency” and emphasizing the co-emergence of the entities in a regime of government (p. 148). Lemke’s focus in chapter seven is to draw out the ramifications of Foucault’s brief mention¹ of the idea of a “government of things” (p. 84) into a more fully fledged analytic of power strengthened by ontological insights from STS, while avoiding the political shortcomings of new materialist projects. Chapter eight advances the concept of “environmentality” as a particular variant of governmental rationality made legible via the analytic of a government of things. Lemke argues that contemporary governance is marked by an increasing focus on intervening at the level of environmental conditions and the corresponding “rise of a new set of technologies that seek to measure and control environmental forces” (p. 177). In light of some severe dangers posed by this mode of government, Lemke hopes that the political value of his analytic can show itself in rendering environmentality intelligible and contestable in practical experiments of “counter conduct” (p. 190, see also p. 164-166).

Particular difficulties also arise, however, in Lemke’s explanation of his novel analytic. While the reader should bear in mind that the “analytic grid of a government of things is a conceptual construction site, not a fully fledged proposal but something provisional” (p. 199), the scope of this analytic is still unclear. For instance, Lemke argues that his analytic is capable of making human beings accountable for the “domination, deterioration,

¹ See Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (2007), 96-97 for the original reference.

and suffering they inflict on both human and nonhuman bodies" (p. 158). The notion of domination sits uneasily within the category of government, however, and as Lemke has noted in an earlier analysis, Foucault argues that governmental strategies may lead to domination but mostly take place in conditions where subjects retain some degree of freedom from determination.² Bearing this distinction between domination and government in mind, should the reader understand the analytic of the government of things as stretching itself beyond the original bounds of the concept of government to ultimately account for various forms of domination as well? Considering an example like livestock in factory farms, the notion of even liminally free animals seems extremely difficult to defend, and as Lemke's project proceeds, it may help to clarify the bounds of this analytic, noting where it definitely *does not* extend.

Furthermore, it may benefit Lemke's analytic to revisit the relationship between ethics and politics in Foucault, which is possibly closer to new materialist ideas than he credits. For instance, Lemke is concerned that Jane Bennett's focus on ethical practices leads her in the end to avoid politics altogether (p. 56). Indeed, Bennett is clearly committed to making ethical attachments to nonhuman agencies possible and desirable as a starting point for her research.³ Such an ethical attunement is not foreign to Foucault, and such experiences may be valued as cultivating a "philosophical ethos" spurring modern subjects to test their political limits critically.⁴ Lemke himself has recognized the importance of this ethical self-cultivation as a resource for Foucault's notion of critique,⁵ and it does not seem implausible that new materialist experiments in pushing the limits of ethical relation may generate impetus for transgressive critique in Foucault's sense. Lemke has good reason to push new materialists on their political outlook, but it may serve the burgeoning analytic of a government of things to not write off new materialist ethical positions as avoiding politics altogether and instead relate their insights to Foucault's ethos.

In sum, *The Government of Things* allows for a very fruitful encounter between Foucault and new materialist concerns. While the ultimate trajectory of Lemke's analytic of the government of things is still a bit unclear, it should not be doubted that he has produced a remarkable piece of scholarship that will continue to generate innovative readings of Foucault.

² Thomas Lemke, "Foucault, Governmentality, Critique," *Rethinking Marxism* 14:3 (2002), 54, see also Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *The Final Foucault*, ed. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (1988), 19. A similar concern can be raised regarding the relationship between the government of things and two other technologies of power Lemke identifies: sovereignty and disciplinary power. How might the government of things be articulated in the triangle of sovereignty- discipline- government Lemke expounds to great effect in previous work? See Lemke, Thomas, *Foucault's Analysis of Modern Governmentality* (2019), 192-197.

³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (2010), xii.

⁴ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment," in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (1997), 113.

⁵ Thomas Lemke, "Critique and Experience in Foucault," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28:4 (2011), 37.

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