



# **THE RISE OF REALISM**

**MANUEL DELANDA ▲ GRAHAM HARMAN**



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Manuel DeLanda and  
Graham Harman

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# Part I

## Realism and Materialism

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**Harman:** The reason for this dialogue is that we are both realist philosophers working in a subfield, continental philosophy, that has never been sympathetic to realism. In this tradition the usual procedure, following in the footsteps of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, is to treat realism as a pseudo-problem. It is said that we “always already find ourselves outside in the world” in the mere act of intending an object before the mind. And since the phenomenologist “brackets” the question of whether or not a given phenomenon really exists, then even when dealing with illusory objects we are already outside in the world. For many years I was inclined toward phenomenology myself, and thus am well aware of the various self-deceptions this otherwise admirable school employs in evading the question of how the phenomenal and the real must differ. I saw this again recently in an anti-realist article by Dan Zahavi, the phenomenology gatekeeper of my generation (Zahavi 2016).

Until quite recently, almost no philosopher who was continentally trained saw anything of value in a realist position. Indeed, in our first correspondence some years ago, you stated accurately that “for decades admitting that one was

a realist was equivalent to acknowledging one was a child molester” (DeLanda 2007). The situation in analytic philosophy has always been different. To some extent analytic philosophy was launched explicitly by G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell as a realist reaction against the neo-Hegelian British Idealism of F.H. Bradley and others (Soames 2014). There are also plenty of anti-realist analytic philosophers, of course, but my point is this: analytic philosophers have always taken realism *seriously* in a way that continental philosophers generally still do not.

Now, I know that you actually came to philosophy from computers by way of analytic philosophy, when you found yourself wanting to understand programming languages. But you eventually found your chief influence in a continental philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, and despite the precision and clarity of your writing you are better known by continentals than by analytic philosophers. My own career has been less unorthodox than yours, though still atypical. I attended two rather continental graduate programs in philosophy, and was driven to a realist position by finding in my dissertation that Heidegger only makes sense if pushed in a radically realist direction. That dissertation became my first book, *Tool-Being* (Harman 2002). In a remarkable coincidence, that was the same year that you published your landmark realist interpretation of Deleuze – though even your fans often accept *everything but* your realism (DeLanda 2002). I can’t remember at the moment if your previous books had also declared realism explicitly (DeLanda 1991; 2007). But at least we have a specific date, 2002, as the beginning of a prominent realist current in continental philosophy, flowing from multiple directions. By 2007, there was the Speculative Realist movement, featuring me and three colleagues, which broke apart two years later due to personal and philosophical disagreements (Brassier et al. 2007). In 2011 came the New Realism group of such authors as Maurizio Ferraris (2015) in Turin and Markus Gabriel (2015) in Bonn. I have since learned that Ferraris was on the realist bandwagon as early as 1991, which led directly to a break with his mentor

Gianni Vattimo, one of the most vociferous continental anti-realists of recent decades (Vattimo 1991).

**DeLanda:** Let me add a few remarks to your historical capsule. I was an unapologetic realist after 1991, the year in which my book about warfare was published. The space of the battlefield, although it is decidedly a cultural space, is inhabited by metallic projectiles, shrapnel, shock waves, and fire. All those lethal objects affect human soldiers, leaving corpses and mutilated bodies behind, regardless of whether the soldiers believe the objects exist or not. And for similar reasons my book on the history of the millennium, focusing on matter and energy flows, famines and epidemics, was also unambiguously realist. To take just one example, bacteria and viruses were objectively affecting our bodies centuries before we formed any beliefs about them. On the other hand, I did not offer an argument in those books for the position that all *coherent* materialisms must be forms of realism. I just took for granted that if human history had been so deeply affected by the material culture of weapons and battles, of vaccines and quarantines, of matter and energy flows in industry and trade, then a belief in a mind-independent world followed logically.

**Harman:** That brings us to the present moment. On the one hand, we have your philosophy, which is both ardently realist and ardently materialist. Then there is my own position, which is ardently realist while rejecting materialism as a form of either upward or downward reductionism, depending on whether it takes a scientific/Marxist or social constructionist form (Harman 2010a). But there is also a third position that is sometimes confused with both your philosophy and mine, which might be described as “materialism without realism.” Here we find Karen Barad, a materialist who also argues that objects have no reality apart from their interactions with the mind; she bases this on Niels Bohr’s Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum theory (Barad 2007). Although Barad calls her philosophy “agential

realism,” there is nothing realist about it, since she grants reality no autonomy from the human mind, or at least not from human practices.

Along with Barad’s philosophy, we find another, perhaps even more prominent form of materialism without realism. This can be found in the two most influential continental philosophers living today: Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. Despite their differences, Badiou and Žižek are close allies, and it is easy to see why. First, both sympathize with German Idealism’s elimination of the Kantian thing-in-itself. And second, both sympathize with Lacan’s elimination of the Freudian unconscious as a hidden psychic force in favor of the unconscious as an *immanent* disruption of consciousness: slips of the tongue as gaps in language itself, the encounter with a traumatic kernel that resists symbolization, and so forth. The German Idealist and the Lacanian moves are clearly anti-realist in both letter and spirit, and this is precisely where most continental philosophers are positioned today. Žižek even goes so far as to say: “The true formula of materialism is not that there is some noumenal reality beyond our distorting perception of it. The only consistent materialist position is that *the world does not exist*” (Žižek & Daly 2004: 97).

Let me ask you two questions. First, would you like to disagree with or add to anything I have said about the current state of realism? And second, would you agree that Badiou and Žižek are steering philosophy in the wrong direction as regards materialism’s relation to realism?

**DeLanda:** You are correct that I have been using the terms “realism” and “materialism” as if they were interchangeable when they are not. All (coherent) materialists must be realists, but not all realists must be materialists. A devout Christian is surely a realist about heaven and hell, since he would not accept that my disbelief in those transcendent spaces in any way impinges on their actual existence. Yet, such a Christian realist would clearly not be a materialist. My definition of “materialism” is as a form of realism

that rejects any entity that transcends the material world. The reason I used the term “realism” in *Intensive Science* was that it is a term that is much more “in your face” than “materialism,” and because the latter term has been debased in the last few decades beyond recognition. (I also use the term “neo-materialism” for similar reasons.) But I should stop using the terms “realism” and “materialism” as if they were synonymous.

Now, moving on to the debasement of the term “materialism.” The problem with people like Žižek is that they use this term as short for either “dialectical materialism” or “historical materialism.” So the statement you just quoted can be paraphrased as “the only consistent Marxist position is that the world does not exist.” This revised statement is arguably still false: there are plenty of contemporary Marxists who would disagree with it, and certainly the Engels of “The Dialectics of Nature” would condemn the statement as pure bourgeois ideology. But it at least makes sense, since it would point to Žižek’s belief that after poststructuralism (most adherents of which were anti-realists), Marxism itself had to change to absorb the new ideas put forward by these thinkers. To me, all this implies (as I have argued for a long time) that Marxism itself is exhausted and that we need to create a brand new leftist political economy based on neo-materialist ideas. You have a more nuanced take on Žižek’s strategy. Do you care to share it?

**Harman:** Žižek for me is a fascinating but sometimes frustrating figure. As an entertainer he’s nearly unparalleled in the history of philosophy. Giordano Bruno was probably the last philosopher as funny as Žižek, and before that maybe Diogenes the Cynic. Admittedly, some people don’t find him funny at all: all the sex jokes become overwhelming for some readers, and occasionally he crosses the line of decent behavior (the child pornography reference near the beginning of *The Parallax View* being perhaps the worst instance). Nonetheless, I love Žižek’s animal spirits and his tendency to make blunt statements and stick his neck out, unlike

his evasive and dithering postmodernist forerunners. I also think he's probably underrated as a philosopher, though of course I agree completely that his statements about how one must now be an idealist to be a materialist are absurd. But I mentioned earlier that he can be frustrating, and what frustrates me most is that he spends very little time on the crucial issue we're discussing right now: realism and anti-realism. He simply takes it for granted that Hegel knocked Kant flat on his back on the question of the things-in-themselves, and Lacan (an extreme idealist whose "Real" has little of reality about it and functions primarily as a trauma for humans) simply bolstered Žižek's confidence in his idealism. I don't get the sense that he has ever really worked through the arguments about realism fully for himself. Above all, he simply seems *annoyed* by the realist option, and usually just repeats the Hegel–Lacan arguments on this topic.

**DeLanda:** Žižek as entertainer, or, perhaps more accurately, as social commentator, does have something to offer. There are many social phenomena that are either too insignificant (like the different shapes of toilets across European countries) or too complex and poorly understood to be tackled by sociologists or anthropologists. In these cases, witty social commentary is perhaps the best that we can have, while we wait for a serious theoretical treatment to come along.

**Harman:** A related point, one that Žižek (1989) raises himself in connection with his discussion of Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978), concerns another "materialist" but definitely anti-realist use that people have made of Marx in recent years. Whenever I make the realist point that objects must have reality independent of the various networks and social systems in which they are involved, a few people inevitably accuse me of "commodity fetishism." Yet this seems to be a stunning and rather basic misreading of Marx. "Commodity fetishism" is the first topic of discussion in *Das Kapital*, where it is clearly a *theory of value*, not an *ontology*. In other

words, Marx is complaining about people who think that pepper or shirts have *value* in themselves apart from the labor that went into producing them. Fair enough. But he is not making the anti-realist ontological claim that nothing *exists* independently of labor. In fact, Marx (1992) gives us at least three examples of *economic* goods that are nonetheless not commodities: air and water freely used by everyone, items bartered in a tribal system, and even corn-rents delivered to feudal lords. But what we have now are pseudo-Marxists like Andrew Cole (2015) and Alexander Galloway (2012) who misinterpret Marx as an anti-realist metaphysician of culture.

**DeLanda:** I know what you mean. I once had the misfortune of having an exchange with Galloway in which he dismissed the objectivity of some scientific classifications (e.g., the Periodic Table of the Elements) by simply quoting Foucault quoting Borges. The novelist had come up with a brilliant but nonsensical classification that Foucault used as an example of how arbitrary classifications can be. But Foucault never wrote about any real scientific field: psychiatry, early clinical medicine, grammar, early economics, criminology etc. are all mere *discourses*, not fields that reliably produce knowledge. Moreover, their subject matter is human beings and that makes them bring institutional norms and practices of control that further distort the discourse. But as much as I despise those who can use a novelist's remarks as an argument against objectivity, I have even more contempt for those who appeal to the worse parts of science – such as Barad. The idea that the consciousness of the observer determines the actual state of an electron is a myth. It was floated in scientific circles (by von Neumann?) as a funny idea to convey the flavor of the uncertainty principle to non-specialists, but it has no basis whatsoever in experimental science, any more than Schrödinger's cat does. In fact, with the exception of a few clueless quantum physicists, no one in the scientific community believes that myth. Hence, humanities departments are the only parts of the academy in which that

myth has flourished, and they are, of course, packed with idealist professors.

But what intrigues me at this point is your own position. You mentioned social constructivism as one reason not to embrace materialism, but social constructivists are all linguistic idealists. Marxists are (or used to be) materialists, but theirs is a special brand in which a priori schemes of synthesis (the negation of the negation) form the core of their position. That makes Marxism a *bad* form of materialism, and certainly does not count as an argument against a materialist position per se. Finally, you mention scientists and suggest that, for them, materialism implies reductionism. This is also wrong. First of all, most scientists are not materialists but empiricists. That is, they believe in the mind-independent existence of objects and events that can be directly perceived (all others are just theoretical posits). Thus, a causal relation is not for them an objective relation in which *one event produces another event*, whether there is anyone to observe it or not, but the *observed constant conjunction* of two events. Russell, whom you mentioned before, was not a realist, but an empiricist, as are many of the most famous names in analytic philosophy, like Quine, Goodman, and van Fraassen. Second, the only true reductionists in science are physicists. Chemists have always known that a compound substance (say, water) could not be reduced to its component parts (oxygen and hydrogen). The latter are fuels that excite fire, the former puts out fire. In chemical textbooks from the beginning of the eighteenth century it is already part of the codified consensus that compounds have properties that are novel relative to those of their components, hence that cannot be reduced to them. And, of course, it is chemists, not physicists, who are the real experts on *matter*.

**Harman:** Russell is not enough of a realist for me either. I would agree that he is more of an empiricist, but not everyone has as much at stake as you (or Roy Bhaskar) do in distinguishing between realism and empiricism (Bhaskar



1997). At any rate, there are plenty of people in analytic philosophy who interpret Russell no less than Moore as part of a *realist* reaction to British Idealism.

As for the relation of scientists and social constructionists to materialism, here's how I look at it. "Materialism" in its original form meant a reduction that explained things away in terms of some ultimate physical element or particle. This was true of the pre-Socratics, many Enlightenment thinkers, and even twentieth-century scientists such as Ernest Rutherford, who admitted to imagining atoms as hard red billiard balls.

But there's another way to reduce things: upward rather than downward. This is what idealists and social constructionists do, by saying that nothing is hidden behind the given. I'd put your empiricists on this side as well. Now, why on earth would anyone call this second group "materialist"? Don't ask me, but many of them do call themselves that. I already gave the examples of Barad and Žižek, who don't seem to be the least bit materialist, but presumably want to link themselves to the Left/Enlightenment political prestige of the term, despite the fact that both give the human subject an outsized role as making up 50 percent of the cosmos. This is anathema to traditional materialism, in which the human being is ultimately just another piece of matter, whereas Barad gives the observer the almost magical power of co-creating the universe, and Žižek holds that the thinking subject is so important and unique that it had to be created through some sort of "ontological catastrophe."

Levi Bryant is just as puzzled by this second claim to materialism as I am. As he nicely puts it: "Materialism has become a *terme d'art* which has little to do with anything material. Materialism has come to mean simply that something is historical, socially constructed, involves cultural practices, and is contingent ... We wonder where the materialism in materialism is" (Bryant 2014: 2).

**DeLanda:** I agree, but this boils down to the confusion between "materialism" and "Marxism" that I just mentioned