

The Hunger of Vibrant Matter: Materialism and Food in the Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis it has set off has severely sharpened the global food crisis. Prior to the pandemic nearly a billion people worldwide were already experiencing either chronic or acute hunger (Chotiner). Since the onset of the pandemic, farmers have had to waste massive amounts of food because they could not sell it. Large U.S. farms, for instance, were destroying “tens of millions of pounds of fresh food” in mid-April (Yaffe-Bellamy and Corkery). Meanwhile, people are starving and hunger is expected to reach a “catastrophic” level, doubling the number of those experiencing “acute food insecurity”—a euphemism for extreme hunger, malnutrition, and starvation (Chotiner). The reigning narrative about the looming food crisis-upon-crisis has pointed to “logistical” issues to explain away the crisis of commodity production: production for exchange and not to meet people’s needs. For example, Arif Husain, the World Food Programme’s chief economist, lends credibility to this narrative of “logistics” when he states: “We have ample global stocks of food to feed everybody,” but “[t]he problem is the movement of those commodities. The problem is how can we get the food from where it is produced to where it is needed” (Chotiner). Here Husain also makes clear that the logic of logistics is a “distributionist” logic—that is, from this view “logistics” is the “logistics” of (re)distribution of already produced food—hence putting out of sight the question of food production and the way that the production of food as a commodity determines its (mal)distribution.

In the U.S./national version of this reigning narrative, the discussion of the crisis and its cause/s revolves around the “logical obstacles” and “challenges” involved in repackaging and redistributing food to other buyers as well as charities (e.g., food banks) after the pandemic forced the closure of restaurants and hotels as well as disrupting the distribution of food through institutions such as schools (Yaffe-Bellamy and Corkery). This narrative simply ignores the fundamental contradiction between production for exchange (profit) versus production for use (need), which is the source not only of intermittent food deprivation, but of chronic and acute, life-threatening *hunger* for hundreds of millions of people worldwide. This story obscures the fact that the means exist to end hunger, but these means are directed instead to profit-making for a small class of capitalists.

In contrast to the reigning narrative, bourgeois theory, as usual, offers a more subtle reading. But, in the end, it provides only a more subtle subtle reading within the logic of logistics—that is, (re)distribution severed from production. From this view we get ethical consumption as a “solution” to the food crisis. Food, for instance, is treated by such new materialist theorists as Jane Bennett, as “lively” matter with its own agency that is represented as being ignored by humanist thought. New materialism emerged as one of the main interpretive tendencies in cultural theory after what Slavoj Žižek calls the “fading” of Derridean deconstruction (114). The main claim of new materialism, to quote from one of its early “manifestos,” is that poststructuralism (the deconstructive turn to culture) “privileges language, discourse, culture, and values” and consequently, neglects “climate change or global capital and population flows, the biotechnological engineering of genetically modified organisms, or the saturation of intimate and physical lives by digital, wireless, and virtual technologies” (Coole and Frost 3, 5). However, I call it a “bourgeois” theory because it displaces “materialism” (which is a relation to mode of production) with a “self-vital” matter-ist substance existing outside the social relations of production (Bennett). Matter-ism is an evasion of materialism.

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, for instance, Jane Bennett writes: “If I am right that an image of inert matter helps to animate our current practice of aggressively wasteful and planet-endangering consumption, then a materiality experienced as a lively force with agentic capacity could animate a more economically sustainable public” (51). Like all idealist theories, for Bennett the problem lies not in the practices of food production, but in the “style” of consumption fostered by “an image of inert matter.” For Bennett, in other words, it is not the material relations within which food is produced—wage labour/capital relations, which determine the only means of access to food for the majority of people on the planet is to submit to performing unpaid surplus labor (exploitation) for the employer—that is the cause of hunger amidst plenty, but the thoughtless, greedy consumption of food by some that causes the hunger of others.

In Bennett’s view what is more material than exploitation is the new status of the object (in bourgeois theory) as an independent actor producing effects. Thus in “Edible Matter” she proposes re-conceiving food as an “actant”—in the terms of Bruno Latour’s now reigning discourse of nonhuman agency (*Science in Action*)—which produces “effects” as the basis for transforming (particularly “American”) consumption so that it is more “artful” and, by extension, more equitable. In other words, if logistics is “that part of supply chain management that plans, implements, and controls the efficient, effective forward and reverse flow and storage of goods, services, and related information between the point of origin and the point of consumption in order to meet customers’ requirements” (Murphy and Knemeyer 21), then Bennett’s “vibrant materialism,” which focuses on “the distinctive capacities or efficacious powers of particular material configurations” (ix)—configurations that are limited to configurations of consumption of that which is already produced within relations of exploitation—is a form of logical analysis par excellence.

Take, for instance, Bennett’s discussion of the “hitherto unrecognized powers of dietary fats” (41). “[C]ertain lipids,” she argues, “promote particular human moods or affective states” which, in turn, can have positive (or negative) impacts on culture and by extension society (41). Bennett supports this argument by, for instance, citing scientific studies that show that consumption of food rich in omega-3 fatty acids (like some wild fish) has been found to reduce “disciplinary offenses” in prison populations, produce “significant improvement” in cognition and behavior among certain children with disabilities, and show promise in preventing and redressing serious mental illnesses like schizophrenia, bipolar affective disorder, and major depression.

Bennett refers to “the eater-eaten complex” or the “assemblage in which persons and fats are participants” and argues that “[t]o take seriously the efficacy of nonhuman fat is, then, not only to shift one’s idea about what counts as an actor but also to focus one’s attention away from individuals and onto actants in assemblages” (42). When Bennett refers to the “assemblage in which persons

and fats are participants,” what she is referring to, in a rather complex language, is eating, or consumption of foods that have already been produced and distributed. In other words, she *presupposes* food (“as actant”) *as always already produced and available for consumption*. As such, Bennett’s assemblage theory, which she presents as a radically democratic theory because it breaks from humanism and its anthropocentrism which negates the agency of nonhuman actants, is radically ahistorical: it presumes labor as a force of nature that transforms it, the form of labor which must take place daily throughout all of human history in all modes of production and historical formations. In doing so, she also erases from view the historical form of labor within capitalism (wage-labor) and thus food as exchange-value.

Agency, in contrast to Bennett’s and other new materialists’ claims, which reduce materialism to matterism, is not the production of “effects.” It is “purposeful” “productive” labor, which is to say that it is an “expenditure of human labour-power” and “in a specific form and with a definite aim” (Marx, *Capital* 56). For historical materialism, it is the means by which humans, in their dialectical relations with nature, transform nature to meet social need, and in doing so, transform themselves. This collective agency of labor produces all value under capitalism, and it is the basis on which all humans’ needs can be met with the transformation of private property relations. The posthumanist double de-agentizing of agency, first by reduction of human agency to “effects” and then by making it an agency shared by all animate and inanimate “matter,” is in actuality an ideological means of disappearing the global subject of labor and its revolutionary role. A world in which food-things appear as the basis of the social, however, is not an “enlightened” age of human sensitivity to the nonhuman other but a symptom of profound human alienation through exploitation, the historical stage of productive relations in which “the relationships between the producers, ... take on the form of a social relation between the products of labour” (Marx, *Capital* 82).

Contrary to Bennett’s implication that hunger is a problem because of the thoughtless, greedy consumption of food by some, hunger is a problem under capitalism because food is a commodity whose (exchange-)value, like all commodities, is determined by the socially necessary labor time on average required to produce it and as this falls due to competition and concentration of capital, food is overproduced relative to the amount of labor required for its production. The result is too many people without the means to buy food on the one hand and too much food without buyers on the other. In other words, as the productivity of labor increases with, for instance, the introduction of new machinery (as in industrial agriculture and agribusiness), the ratio of surplus labor (the basis of profits) to necessary labor (the basis of wages) grows (exploitation deepens) and this means that “The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth [s]he produces, the more production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities [s]he creates” (Marx, *Economic* 271-72). In other words, within capitalist relations of production, production of food in order to nourish people—its use-value—is *necessarily* secondary to the production of food as a means to produce surplus (exchange-)value, because such value is the basis of profit. “Obesity,” is an effect, for one, of poor quality food and, like hunger, stems from the production of food for profit rather than use (nutritional needs). The massive waste of food at the same time as increasing masses of the working class go hungry during the pandemic is, indeed, “ghastly” (Yaffe-Bellamy and Corkery), but it is a ghastliness that is a predicted and predictable effect of the same underlying class antagonism that is at work in the “normal” everyday of capitalism—the subordination of use to exchange, need to profit, workers’ needs to owners’ profits.

While the theory of vibrant matter quietly erases from view materialism as the materialism of production, in actuality, of course, this does not change that “the first premise of all human existence, and, therefore, of all history” (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 31) is “that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to ‘make history’” and since “life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things,” then “[t]he first

historical act is ... the production of the means to satisfy these needs" (41-42). To posit food as "always already" available for, or in the process of, "coacting" in "assemblages" is to take up a bourgeois perspective wherein these basic human needs are always already met—by the producing class—and thus to erase, along with production, *the social relations of production* which, in capitalism, are exploitative relations which structure daily life for all, whether we are conscious of it or not. In the 1859 Preface, Marx writes:

In the social production of their life, [people] enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces ... [and, moreover,] at a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression of the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. (263)

It is this contradiction between the for-profit relations of production and the existing forces of production that means that while the productive forces that have been developed within capitalism make it possible to meet all people's needs for food, this need cannot be met until and unless wage-labor ceases to be the measure of value that determines individuals' access to the means to live. In Bennett's theory of the materiality of assemblages, the effects of this underlying contradiction, including hunger amidst plenty, are dehistoricized and naturalized as "the strange logic of turbulence" of vibrant matter and its interactions (xi). What Bennett is proposing is, in her words, "a better discernment" (ix) and a "decent politics" (xi) that amounts to a (re)partition of the sensible (vii).

Having eliminated any discussion of the mode of production, Bennett's ethical concern for "things" amounts to little more than a more "fair" and "equitable" distribution of the existing "green washing" of capitalism that does not change social relations as much as it seeks to place everything on a conceptually flat plane. Her version of assemblage democracy—which recognizes agency in things while reducing human agency as a sign of "hubris"—reflects the economic relations of capital as "dead labour which vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (Marx, *Capital* 241). In a world in which "corporations are people," "money is speech," and workers are forced to return to work during a deadly pandemic, giving "things" more of a voice is already what has happened under capital. What is necessary is not "thingifying" the world—which is really another way of putting commodification out of view—but bringing about the real, materialist democracy of communism, in which the goal of food production is meeting the health needs, nutritional well-being, and enjoyment of life.

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