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Locating (New) Materialist Characters and Processes in Global Governance

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Abstract: This contribution probes *A Theory of Global Governance* from a materialist perspective. I focus on three forms of materialism that have played a significant role in social theory as well as IR theory: the materialisms of markets, of artifacts and of embodied affects. Integrating these materialisms serves to unsettle the conceptualization of global governance and of the politics of authority, legitimacy and contestation underpinning it. A materialist perspective moves the theory of global governance toward a focus on processes instead of institutions, allowing it to capture both the multiple forms of global governance and their increasingly rapidly shifting forms. The contribution is anchored in a discussion of the global governance of cyber-security.

Once upon a time, there was a world where global governance was a matter of states establishing international institutions. In time state actors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) reflexively supported and/or contested the resulting authority formations, developed legitimation narratives and engaged in counter-institutionalizations that might deepen or fragment the global governance landscape. Such might be the beginning of a new materialist¹ tale inspired by Michael Zürn's *A Theory of Global Governance* to which these elements are key.² But how would the story continue? What is the significance of these new materialisms for stories about global governance, such as Zürn's? This contribution argues that taking new materialist insights on board would require introducing at the very least three new materialist *characters* (market dispositives, minions and mimes) into the story and making space in its plot for three *processes* (relational entanglings, infrastructurings and sensings) through which they do politics.

In an effort to keep this argument from becoming an abstract “gobbledygook” exercise in “armchair theorizing,” I make it with reference to global-internet-governance (as much as the space I have allows).³ This contribution, however, is not only — or even mainly — about internet-governance specifically. The characters and the processes I introduce matter well beyond

¹ New materialism in various versions has flourished since the 1980s with far reaching consequences for most areas of social science and humanities including philosophy, literary studies, gender studies, science and technology studies, legal theory, visual culture and International Relations. For overviews directly pertinent to global governance discussion see e.g. Best and Walters 2013; Amicelle et al. 2015; Srnicek et al. 2013, or Hohmann 2019.

² Zürn 2018.

³ Bourdieu cited in Jenkins 1992, 67, and Strathern, 2018, 62 respectively.

it albeit in contextually different incarnations and ways. Their absence in *A Theory* therefore signals not only the limits of this theory when it comes to a particularly central area of global governance. More fundamentally, it underscores that *A Theory* is ignoring aspects of politics fundamental for the governance issues it purports to grapple with. As I will return to in the conclusion, this is problematic not only analytically but also politically. Before getting there, however, I need to explain the import of including materialist characters and the political processes they engage in when theorizing on global governance.

2. Including Materialist Characters

The materialist characters I wish to introduce make things happen in new materialist accounts. They are shorthand representations of the actants in different families of materialism. The market dispositives I begin with have a central place in (post-)Marxian approaches, the minions in the materialism of the broad church of science and technology studies and the mimes in feminist traditions. Each of these materialist traditions is itself a complex composite and they of course overlap and connect. My characters may therefore emerge more as caricatures that accentuate some overarching features while leaving out the details. The intention with such caricaturing is to clarify the general arguments in favour of including them in theorizations on global governance.

(i) Market Dispositives

The first character I would like to introduce is the market dispositive. A dispositive in French is simply a regulatory measure. The term has been developed conceptually to grapple with the complex, shifting heterogeneous arrangements that do regulation. Dispositive refers the composite of actors, institutions and process, but also to objects and artefacts, that do

governance.⁴ As such they are located at the core of global governance. This is particularly clear in the context of internet governance. The opening chapter of a recent volume on the topic does not use the term dispositive but describes something very much like it when suggesting that: “Internet governance transcends traditional governmentcentric mechanisms like national statutes or intergovernmental treaties. Governance is collectively enacted by the design of technology, the policies of private companies, and the administrative ...”⁵

Adding the qualifier “market” to dispositive is a way of emphasizing the pervasiveness of (quasi-)market logics in the dispositives that are relevant to contemporary global governance. Companies play a crucial role. As Gillespie puts it, platforms are the “custodians of the internet.”⁶ Companies are constantly enrolled in global governance also in other areas. Their presence is core to the (no longer) new quasi-religious worshipping of Public-Private-Partnerships.⁷ But beyond being about the presence of companies, the qualifier market is intended to capture to a form of governance that works through markets or quasi-market

⁴ There is an extensive literature on dispositives that emphasizes ways of defining them. By way of example, Deleuze (1992, 162) emphasizes the lines connecting these elements. He therefore defines dispositives as “composed of the following elements: lines of visibility and enunciation, lines of force, lines of subjectification, lines of splitting, breakage, fracture, all of which criss-cross and mingle together, some lines reproducing or giving rise to others, by means of variations or even changes in the way they are grouped.”

⁵ Musiani et al., 2016, 4.

⁶ Gillespie 2018.

⁷ Minow 2003.

mechanisms. Competition, investment, supply and demand, profits and efficiency become core are part of regulatory language and indeed turned into regulatory processes. An indication of this is that the trade-fair is competing with—and sometimes displacing— diplomatic exchange in global governance. This is obvious in contexts specifically geared to connecting public and private actors such as Davos.⁸ More surprisingly is how pervasive the trade-fair form is also beyond them. The ITU yearly “AI for Good Summit” for example bears striking similarity to trade-fairs such as “The Future of Enterprise Technology.”⁹

Market dispositives are doubly material in character. As dispositives, they comprise the material—viz. the design of internet technology Musiani et al. refer to. As pervaded by the market form, they work through the material reinforcing its centrality and significance. Market processes are material in the sense that they organize the exchange of commodities. The things, ideas, services, processes, and people governed through the (quasi-)market therefore have to be turned into commodities — that is be commodified¹⁰— to be governable. Excluding market dispositives, *A Theory* is missing something fundamental about contemporary global governance.

(ii) Minions

A second new materialist character deeply involved in global governance is what, with

⁸ Garsten and Sörbom 2018.

⁹ Leander, 2020.

¹⁰ Commodification is a complex process with far reaching consequences, as argued many times, including perhaps most famously by Polanyi (1957).

Pignarre and Stengers (2011) we may term the minion. They borrow the term minions from the movie *Despicable Me* because the little yellow figures there so well capture the central importance for governance of the mundane work, done by seemingly insignificant characters, from below, at the micro-level. These characters are often part of dispositives, however, those working with them in science and technology studies prefer to disentangle them from the complex dispositives of which they may be a part and instead focus on the work they do independently. Minions are often mundane artefacts. In the context of the internet, typical minions whose centrality for governance have been amply discussed include the protocol, the cable, the screen, the indicator, the algorithm or the cloud-server. Other areas of global governance would obviously have different characters.

To see the centrality of minions as characters doing global governance, considering the debates ranging around the role of algorithms is a helpful example. Algorithms do all manner of things in relation to internet-governance. They block or allow access to sites and servers. They analyse information flows and distribute them. They participate in political decisions as they trigger (re-)actions to information.¹¹ Their significance is steadily growing. The speed and quantities of information to be handled in the age of big data make resort to automated processes, i.e. processes where algorithms do the work, increasingly common. Well beyond areas— such as e.g. High Frequency Trading¹² — where the centrality of algorithms for governance is inescapably obvious, debates rage about what constitutes governance in a context where “law is

¹¹ E.g. Gillespie 2014 and 2018; Aradau and Blanke 2018.

¹² MacKenzie 2019.

code and code is law.”¹³. How can we think about basic questions such as ethics, accountability and responsibility when algorithms govern?¹⁴

These questions would seem to merit a place in any contemporary discussion of global governance and not only the ones concerning the internet. However, raising them presupposes making place for the minions that make them pertinent. *A Theory* does not. I assume that this is not because Zürn thinks that global governance has remained untouched by digitization (although his book has surprisingly little to say on the topic). Rather, his theory simply does not accommodate them.

(iii) Mimes

Finally, a third cherished materialist character of feminist pedigree—the body—is centrally involved in global governance of the internet and beyond. One way of insisting that material aspects of the body remain in focus is to think of them as mimes. It underlines that, as with Pierrot-the-mime, embodiment (not text/language) is what is significant about their presence. Looking at global-internet-governance gives an idea of why including bodies may be important.

Digital technologies imbricate the body deeply in the online realm. We are hybrid, cyborg beings born of computers.¹⁵ This imbrication is transforming bodies by distributing and dividing them and by connecting them to the feedforward rationalities emerging from the data we generate

¹³ Lessig 2009.

¹⁴ E.g. Ziewitz 2016; Johns 2016; Ananny and Crawford 2018.

¹⁵ Respectively, Thrift 2008; Haraway 1991; Hayles 2005.

in online interactions.¹⁶ There is a politics of the body at stake on the internet. Our biometric “data-doubles” are both objects of internet-governance *and* subjects doing it. Our bodies are enrolled in the creation of phenotypic others and subject to the governing effects of these types.¹⁷

This imbrication of bodies in global governance is not only taking place in the realm of the digital. Rather, it is enrolled in and subjected to governance far more generally. Enloe’s discussion of the gendered and racial politics of Carmen Miranda’s body is a classical IR statement of the point.¹⁸ Reaching further back, Stoler’s account of how Dutch and French imperialism in Asia rested on a micro-politics of race, gender and sexuality shows the import of a politics and policing of the body for imperial rule.¹⁹ Making space for the body, the mime, as a character in stories about the global rule and governance is clearly crucial well beyond the internet. If bodies such as Miranda’s or the Dutch imperial subject do politics—if they assemble and dissent as Butler puts it we need stories acknowledging their presence.²⁰ We need stories that are useful for reflecting on what “governance” and “citizen action” engaging in it mean, not only “in the time of the Network”²¹ but more generally. Indeed, such stories are particularly important as they are a safeguard against the illusion of disembodied politics, including the fetishization of

¹⁶ Respectively, Shah 2015; Hansen 2015; Chun 2016.

¹⁷ M’charek et al. 2014; Nakamura 2013.

¹⁸ Enloe 1990.

¹⁹ Stoler 2010.

²⁰ Butler 2015.

²¹ Shah 2013.

technology and technological solutions.²² *A Theory* unfortunately does not contribute a single word or concept to such a story but rather silences it.

Markets, minions and mimes are not only cherished characters of different strands of new materialism. They have a role in contemporary global governance. More emphatically: they *do* global governance. However, they have no place in *A Theory*. Including them would require a thorough recasting. Worse still, to parse their significance for *A Theory* would require focussing on the processes through which they come to matter. A change in the central plot and storyline of *A Theory* seems called for.

3. Writing Materialist Processes

Including materialist characters in *A Theory* is one thing. Making the work they do in global governance visible in theory is another. It requires telling a story that includes it. One can tell such a story by showing how they are part of the kinds of processes that are at the core of *A Theory*.²³ However, such inclusion requires not only adding a material element to these processes but radically revising the assumptions underpinning them. Bastardizing feminist slogans: “it is not enough to add the material and stir”. To illustrate this point, I will show that writing materialist processes into *A Theory* requires revising its assumptions about what agency means, where politics is located and how it is reflexively engaged. It requires allowing for respectively relational entanglings, infrastructurings and sensings.

²² Braidotti 2013; Chun 2008.

²³ As done, e.g., by Walters 2001 or Davies et al. 2012 to accounts of governance in other contexts.

(i) *Relational Entanglings*

It does matter that materialist characters are material. To acknowledge their place in doing global governance we need a way to account for material agency. Two moves in new materialist theorizing have been particularly central in creating such acknowledgement: focus on relational processes and the emphasis on socio-material entanglings²⁴ in these.

Relational process ontology is obviously not exclusively new materialist.²⁵ However, for most materialist approaches it is particularly central.²⁶ It opens for a conceptualization of agency that accords a symmetrical place to social and materialist characters. Rather than connecting agency to intentions, relational ontologies connect it to doings, to the effects a character (or actant) has on relational processes. Agency on this account only makes sense in a dynamic relational context, such as a field, a network, an assemblage, an agencement, or a self-organizing process.²⁷ It is because they fashion, produce, enact, translate or perform these relational processes that characters matter. Some theorists (e.g. Bourdieu) place a re- in front of these formulations to gesture towards the repetitive stickiness of relational processes. Others prefer to accentuate their serendipitous, open character (e.g. Connolly). Either way, the point is that

²⁴ The standard concept is entanglements. I have deformed this putting a gerund there to signal that entanglements are actually processes rather than states.

²⁵ E.g. Guzzini 2017.

²⁶ This is not a consensus. Many would side with versions of Harman's argument that objects should be at the core, and that any concession to the social and ideational inevitably amounts to obscuring the role of the material (Harman, 2015).

²⁷ Respectively, Sterne 2003; Latour 2005; Callon 2008; Connolly 2013.

thinking relationally makes it possible to see the active agency of the materialist characters (the mime, the minion and the body) in global governance. Even if they do not have such intentions, trade-fairs, algorithms, and bodies engage in global internet-governance in the sense of actively (re-)enacting it.

Second, and directly related to this, adopting a relational process ontology also alters the conceptualization of the characters. They cease to be unitary singulars with given interests or essential characteristics that are at the origin of their agency. Instead, Mol's point that the body is multiple could be writ large to capture the status of socio-materially entangled characters more generally.²⁸ Moreover, their status is therefore unstable. Characters may shift status depending on the context and time. Things have a "social life" and a "cultural biography".²⁹ They are co-produced and emerging in the governance relations they are part of. The recovery of concepts such as the Leibnizean monad, Spinozean affects or Tardean mimetics in (new) materialism reflects the interest in how to better theorize this kind of subject and the forms associated with it.

Writing this relationally entangled, processual agency into *A Theory* requires a revision and decentring of both agency and actor. Focussing on the "network forms of governance" as author suggests in his contribution to the symposium is a step in this direction. It breaks up the formal unity of the actors that do most work in *A Theory*. However, to see the agency of new materialist characters requires going further and conceptualizing these networks as socio-materially entangled and dynamic. For example, commercially generated encryption standards perform work governing the circulation of images of bodies and hence the production of a racialized,

²⁸ Mol 2002.

²⁹ Appadaruai 1988 and Kopytoff's chapter in the volume.

gendered corporeal politics. This work slides out of focus lest network forms of governance be re-conceptualized so as to make space for shifting socio-material entanglings.

(ii) *Infrastructurings*

Second, and along similar lines, the processes through which materialist actors do politics are located elsewhere than in the public arena of political debate at the core *A Theory. Pace* authors (in this issue) such processes may not be the most salient for the making of global governance. Rather, focussing on them tends to perpetuate the misrecognition of political processes located elsewhere. One such elsewhere is the infrastructure.

Infrastructures, the way they are infrastructuring politics and the infrapolitics surrounding these processes have indeed come to occupy a core place in debates about digitization and internet-governance.³⁰ More generally, across the social sciences and the humanities, we are witnessing what amounts to a “turn” to “infrastructuralism.”³¹ As an introductory chapter on internet-governance puts it, to understand internet-governance we need to move from thinking about governance *of* infrastructures to governance *by* infrastructure.³² This focus on infrastructurings is closely connected to an awareness of the deeply political “invisible work” done by infrastructures and a related interest in opening this work to analysis, showing it and engaging

³⁰ Leander, 2020. For agenda setting arguments, see among many: Star 1999; Dantec and DiSalvo 2013; DeNardis 2012; Easterling 2014; Edwards et al. 2009; Miller 2015; Pipek and Wulf 2009; Plantin et al. 2018.

³¹ Peters 2015, 33.

³² DeNardis and Musiani 2016.

with it.³³ In internet governance this includes focussing on the work done by encryption standards, cables, and ITPs.³⁴ The politics of this mundane and boring work is easy to overlook, especially as it does not follow an orderly, overarching logic. Rather, it tends to be disjointed and messy if not outright failing.³⁵ The “snarls” of breakdowns, failures, disruptions and discontinuities are the sounds of infrastructurings.³⁶

Although *A Theory* is unaffected by the turn to infrastructuralism, writing infrastructural processes into it would be possible. For example, by “politicizing” — which as Zürn puts it involves “making political what was unpolitical by bringing it into politics.”³⁷ New materialist scholars have worked with analogous ideas focussing on making things “public” or “international.”³⁸ However, making room for it in *A Theory* in would require ridding “politicizing” and “making political” of their formal political connotations and associating them with infrastructures.

iii) Sensings

Finally, in *A Theory* political processes are anchored in articulated motivations and carefully crafted strategies. They are rational and reasonable. Zürn dissociates his theory from the assumed

³³ Star and Stauss 1999.

³⁴ Respectively, Kaminski 2017; Starosielski 2015; DeNardis 2009.

³⁵ Star and Bowker 2006.

³⁶ Miller 2015.

³⁷ Zürn 2018, 140.

³⁸ Respectively, Latour and Weibel 2005 and Salter 2016.

and taken for granted. Authority is both “epistemic” and “reflexive” in that it “is typically not internalized but allows scrutiny of the exercise of authority at any time.”³⁹ While this version of politics as a matter of reasoned reflexive strategizing is comforting, it marginalizes materialist characters. Writing about the processes through which they make politics requires giving up the comforts of reason and acknowledging the role also of sensings, or what Johns terms sensory economies.⁴⁰

To claim that the reflected, reasoned arguments of algorithms or bodies matter for global governance would be bizarre. To say that their sensings are significant is not. On the contrary. Algorithms record anomalies and make up digital security subjects by sensing them not by reasoning about them. Analogously, a wide array of sensors registering geo-location but also sight, sounds, temperatures, blood pressures, or chemicals are involved in global governance. They are built into the cameras managing people at borders, the technologies used to control the cargo of ships entering a harbour, or the fitbit watches that have become pervasive in the government of bodies.⁴¹ The politics of these sensors is not reasonably strategizing. Even when their sensing is reflexive, it is reflexivity of the kind Zürn distances himself from. Our data-eating/ data-emitting bodies constantly (reflexively) absorb, accommodate, and adjust to data that is itself constantly (reflexively) absorbing, accommodating, and adjusting to our bodily

³⁹ Zürn 2015, 8; see also Pouliot 2020.

⁴⁰ Johns 2017.

⁴¹ E.g. Fotopoulou and O’Riordan 2017; Leander 2019.

transformations.⁴² However, the reflexive here involves no conscious scrutiny. On the contrary, it is reflexivity of the other, automatic kind.

Writing materialist processes into *A Theory* requires more than minor re-touches to the story line. It involves writing about relational entanglements that diffuse and decentre the notion of agency and anchor it in doings rather than intentionality. It also implicates writing about a decentring of politics from the public political debate to mundane, messy and failing infrastructurings. Finally, it requires writing sensings into a story that can no longer revolve exclusively around reasoned strategies. These changes are rather fundamental. They not only complicate the story of *A Theory* but multiply the lines this story needs to follow.

4. Conclusion

Locating materialist characters and processes in *A Theory* has far-reaching consequences. Instead of the familiar states, international institutions and NGOs, it leaves us with a motley cast comprising also market dispositives, minions and mimes. Instead of a plot focussed on the interaction of these characters, in a readily recognizable political sphere/debate where each actor reflexively elaborates and scrutinizes their own strategies, we find ourselves grappling with their socio-material relational entanglings, their imbrication in mundane and failing infrastructurings and their inarticulate sensings. This amounts to more than adding a missing word (or even paragraph) to the story. Fundamental alterations to casting and story line are called for. Zürn will probably balk at the suggestion. Let me nonetheless insist.

⁴² Lupton 2016.

Re-casting *A Theory* and rewriting its plot is of import analytically. It is a way of ensuring that it does not misconstrue global governance and contribute to the obfuscation of the power in it. More importantly, it matters politically. It may help us address author's justified concern (this issue) with the "current political predicament" of illiberalism in Global Governance. If material actors and process play a crucial role, as this contribution suggests they do, understanding them, and possibly engaging them and turning them into allies—or oddkin as Haraway would say⁴³—matters more than a little. It makes space for imaginative constructive political strategies of a kind definitely called for in what Zürn rightly terms the hard times of global governance. Such materialist strategies would necessarily reflect the import of contextualization and plurality and hence "the problem of a one world."⁴⁴ They would strip *A Theory* of its grandiose "A." However, if a title change (along with a recasting and a rewriting) could make *A Theory* live up to its own analytical and political ambitions, may it be worth considering?

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⁴³ Haraway 2016.

⁴⁴ Law 2015; Trowsell et al. 2019.

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