theories and methodologies

What Is the New Redistribution?

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ABOUT SIX YEARS AGO I WAS HAVING LUNCH WITH A COLLEAGUE WHO ENDED OUR CONVERSATION BY ANNOUNCING THAT SHE WAS HEADED OVER to a symposium on Lucretius and modernity. "You don't sound too enthusiastic," I said. "Well," she sighed, "it's the new good materialism, right?"

"It," in this case, was Lucretius, or rather Lucretianism, or really the jumble of platforms—atomism, vitalism, monism, mechanism, physicalism, object-oriented ontology, and so on—lately launched in response to "the eclipse of normative materialisms in philosophy and politics" (Lezra and Blake 1). I suspect that behind this diplomatic plural ("materialisms") lies a single forlorn referent: the historical materialism allied to Marxism. My colleague's sigh acknowledged that this was the materialism being judged passé. It also conceded the real and varied shortcomings of selected Marxian hypotheses, while disclosing some unease that they should be so breezily put to bed. Finally, it breathed a quiet skepticism about the advent of a "new mythology" not only "not grounded on empiricism" but willing to flirt with the covert "attribution of supernatural powers to physical stuff in a way wholly inimical" to its own self-description (Dupré 36–37).

The new materialism holds that there are basic ontological affinities between very different kinds of things—people, plants, rocks, nations, military-industrial complexes—and suggests that those affinities, and not auxiliary antagonisms of species or creed, should guide our behavior toward living and nonliving beings. Timothy Morton, for one, says that climate change isn't meaningfully distinct from "pencils, penguins, and plastic explosive" (176), while Stacey Alaimo describes "science studies, environmental health, environmental justice, popular epidemiology, disability studies, corporeal feminism, film, photography, material memoir, science fiction, and evolution" as essentially autologous insofar as they all exist against the background of a principle that many things have bodies and that all bodies partake of a general "nature" (4). In both cases existential, disciplinary, and political divisions are asked to give way to an "environmental ethos" receptive to otherness in all its guises, to the unanimity beneath that otherness,

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and to the knowledge that "everything is interconnected" at the subatomic level (20).

Although its goal is to evolve "a new formalist method," Caroline Levine's *Forms* is plainly pitched beneath new materialism's big tent. The kinship shows in the writing, most emphatically in Levine's use of the listing topos.[1] Morton gives us pencils, penguins, and plastics and calls them all hyperobjects; Levine gives us "ballot boxes, biological clocks, and lyric poems" and calls them all forms. Forms are "nation-states, bounded subjects, and domestic walls." They are "prison and presidential terms, naturalization periods, and the legal age for voting, military service, and sexual consent," "hierarchies of high and low, black and white, masculine and feminine, straight and queer, have and have-not," "laboring bodies as well as odes." The lists go on, as they should, since the premise of *Forms* is that "forms are at work everywhere" (2). New materialists believe that all things share a single substance, and new formalists, if they are of this stripe, believe much the same. They believe, that is, that the best way to understand the world and "to effect social change" in it is by pinning down some significant ubiquitous entity to which all the world's contents reduce (68). Not coincidentally, the good new formalism also turns away from the bad old Marxism—a point to which I'll return below.

Jonathan Kramnick and I recently characterized Levine's book as an instance of "reductionist formalism," by which we meant partly to indicate its methodological overlap with work like Morton's and Alaimo's ("Form").[2] The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines *reduction* as "the idea that if an entity *x* reduces to an entity *y* then *y* is in a sense *prior to x*, is *more basic than x*, is such that *x fully depends upon* it or is *constituted by it*. Saying that *x* reduces to *y* typically implies that *x* is *nothing more than y* or *nothing over and above y*" (van Riel and Van Gulick). Thus, a debate rages from Descartes on down about whether the mind reduces to the brain and, if it does, how our "technicolor phenomenology" could arise from "soggy grey matter" (McGinn 349). Thus, in *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), the Epicurean precept that all things are made of nothing more than atoms sponsors various philosophical perspectives on life (imperishable), death (not to be feared), and change (exfoliations and reshufflings of tiny bodies in space). Thus, in Levine's *Forms* form is the lowest common denominator to which ballot boxes, biological clocks, and lyric poems are all brought back: "Form, for our purposes, will mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" (3).

There is, however, a hitch. Levine's form is a moving target, elaborate and elastic in ways an atom or a firing neuron could never be. Form is an ordering principle, but so is "politics," whose "activities of ordering, patterning, and shaping" constitute its function. "There is no politics without form," for "it is the work of form to make order [and] this means that forms are the stuff of politics"; politics, too, is "order," or "a matter of distributions and arrangements" (3). This may read like a tautology in three parts—form is political because politics is formal, and order is formal and political because politics is formal insofar as it makes order—but it is better understood as an analytic proposition in Kant's sense. The case Levine makes for a politics of form follows purely as a matter of logic from the definitions she gives of those terms. Once it has been posited that form is order and that form makes politics because politics makes order, to say there is no politics without form is like saying there are no bodies without extension, once we've defined a body as a thing extended (Kant 141–42). When politics and form and order are fixed as one another's ontological predicates, it is not just helpful or interesting to link formalist criticism to political action; it is logically impossible to do otherwise.

Levine's alignment of form, politics, and order in an unbroken propositional relation

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shows her argument to be powerfully syntactic—even literary. Despite her aversion to New Criticism's "sense of form as bounded unity" and its "valuing of containment and exclusion," her definition of form depends, first, on the binding and unification of three disparate entities and, second, on the absorption of all things by the model she describes. The result is that nothing exists outside form or, rather, outside *Forms*. If this closed-circuit exposition intensifies the book's rhetorical strength, it's an uneasy match for the activist stance Levine openly assumes. The book wants to be about "the multiple forms of the world," but statements about the world aren't made true by their syntax—they're made true by the world (17; see also Quine 40–44). Paradigms of self-containment or analyticity that fly in close reading or predicate logic may falter when asked to contribute to what Levine calls her "primary goal": a "formalism" that promotes "radical social change" through "revolutionary political action" (18).

My purpose is not to impugn Levine's criticism or her politics. On the contrary, I'd like to follow her in asking "how . . . literary forms encounter or reflect or enact political ones." If her book has an essentially semantic definition of form, a definition that can't be unmoored from form's relation to order or from order's relation to politics, how does the "bounded container" of this definition "enable certain kinds of political possibilities" and annul others (28)?

Another way of posing this question would be to adapt Marjorie Levinson's challenge to the new formalism, issued in this journal in 2007. "Despite its advocacy rhetoric," Levinson notes, "new formalism does not advocate *for* any particular theory, method, or scholarly practice," leaving us to wonder, "What . . . is a shared commitment minus articulated agreement about the object to which one commits?" (562). We might now ask of Levine, "What is radical social change if the formalism charged with bringing it about is defined only in relation to itself, independent of any particular matters of fact or features of the world?" And "[i]f all politics is formal, how do political forms come to have a specific content and not just a shape?" Finally, "What is the difference between a political form and a political goal?"

Consider this paragraph from Levine's introduction:

> All politics, including revolutionary political action, will succeed only if it is canny about deploying multiple forms. Revolutions must mobilize certain arrangements, certain organized forms of resistance—the takeover of the public square, the strike, the boycott, the coalition. And any redistribution of the world's wealth, which I strongly favor, must follow some kind of organizing principle. Marx's classic slogan, "From each according to one's ability; to each according to one's need," is a careful balancing of inputs and outputs, a structural parallelism that might well govern the organization of energies and distributions in a radical and just new order. Which forms do we wish to see governing social life, then, and which forms of protest or resistance actually succeed at dismantling unjust, entrenched arrangements? (18)

In such a patiently argued book as *Forms*, it comes as a surprise to encounter the casual distortion of Marx on which this paragraph turns. To begin, the phrase that Levine attributes to Marx and that appears in an 1875 document published posthumously as *Critique of the Gotha Program* is not his coinage. An expansive riff on Acts 2.44–45 and 4.35, the needs-ability algorithm has a well-known history in French utopian thought. Versions of it crop up in Étienne-Gabriel Morelly's 1755 *Code de la nature* (*Code of Nature*); in the writings of Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, in the eighteenth century, and of Louis Blanc, in the nineteenth; and on the title page of Étienne Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie* (*Travels in Icaria*), from 1840; in any event, it had currency in radical circles long before Marx took

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it up. In those circles, as in Marx's *Critique*, the principle "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" is used to distinguish communism from socialism, whose standard, by contrast, is "from each according to his abilities, to each *according to his work*" (Marx 321). The distinction between these two phrases has important consequences. Socialism seeks a "redistribution of the world's wealth." Communism seeks to abolish the economy per se.[3]

The crux of this misunderstanding returns us to the matter of Levine's style and to *Forms* as a literary object. There is something powerfully suggestive about her modification of "redistribution" by "any," which prizes the economic meaning of "redistribution" indefinitely agape. "Redistribution," after all, has never referred to just one thing. To take a simple example, the progress of American neoliberalism (that expeditious inadequate term) depends "on a stripped-down, nonredistributive form of 'equality' . . . compatible with [the] continued upward distribution of resources"; "during the 1960s and 1970s," it was accompanied by multipronged "attacks on downwardly distributive social movements, especially the Civil Rights and Black Panther movements, but including feminism, lesbian and gay liberation, and countercultural mobilizations" (Duggan xii). Nothing is intrinsically righteous about redistribution: stuff and money can be allocated broadly or narrowly, to lots of people or to a handful of them; it can move down and it can move up and most often it does the latter. The point, as Marx explains, is that even when capitalism's "content and form are changed" to suit a downwardly redistributive program, "the same principle prevails": "a given amount of labor in one form is exchanged for an equal amount of labor in another form" (320–21). The "careful balancing of inputs and outputs" and "structural parallelism" Levine sees in Marx turn out to be a much more apposite description of the socialist formula he treats as imperfect and transitional. Socialism recomposes the economic order so that capital moves more equitably through it, but it leaves the deep structure of the capital-labor relation as is. The new arrangement may be better, but it is not, to use Levine's word, "radical"—cutting off capital at its foundation or root—because it is not abolitionist.

To be clear, for the Marx of the *Critique* a downwardly redistributive socialism is not anathema to communism but an intermediate form that "*emerges* from capitalist society" and precedes "a higher phase" of development (320–21). This is a theory of progress, and it depends, among other things, on the forward march of linear time. Levine's "any," by contrast, opens outward and hovers in place, leaving the trajectory of the redistribution she favors (upward or downward? for the 1% or the 99%?) undefined and wholly atemporal. We could say it conveys the sentiment that "'the final goal of socialism' . . . whatever it may be, is nothing, [and] the movement," or what Levine calls "collision—the strange encounter between two or more forms that sometimes reroutes intention and ideology"—everything (18; see also Bernstein 168–69).

Perhaps I'm misreading Levine, but the idea of history implied here seems closely to resemble the "spatialize[d] time" she ascribes to historicism, whose paradigms she rebuffs because they "function . . . more like bounded containers than unfolding patterns" (52). This idea follows, I think, from the stronger repudiation of "the dialectic" that succeeds the paragraph quoted above and that rests on a puzzling joint gloss of "dialectical materialism" and "structuralism" as cognates that identify "binary oppositions as a basic structure of social life." There is much to query here, but since there are few things less interesting than people telling other people they're doing dialectics wrong, I'll simply suggest that this definition neutralizes "opposition" by making it purely formal—a metaphysical deadlock instead of a fully incarnate drama

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of conflict and contestation. A more compelling picture is limned by Levine's wish for a formalism that can deal with "the ways that different arrangements can collide to strange effect, with minor forms sometimes disrupting or rerouting major ones," or that can warn "political actors . . . that complicating any single form [they] might advocate are multiple organizing principles always already at work, often clashing and interrupting and rerouting one another." Surely this is compatible with the dialectic as Marxist "literary and cultural studies" have understood it? And surely "a careful, nuanced understanding of the many different and often disconnected arrangements that govern social experience" admits what Levine calls wholes and networks and what, from another point of view, might be called totality (18)?

My point isn't that Levine's politics aren't Marx's. It's that the formalism to which she aspires, which is designed to "open . . . up *a generalizable understanding of political power*," is so general and yet so unbending that it leaves no room for political disagreement (7). Because *Forms* rests on a series of noncontroversial stipulations—forms are everywhere and political activity often involves formal ordering—it is able, from its very first pages, to fashion an argument whose rhetorical self-reflexivity rivals the most airtight New Critical tract. In other words, the tenacity of Levine's commitment to an a priori definition of form as conjoint with politics quashes the possibility of responding politically to *Forms*—that is, of responding to the ambitions Levine articulates from a perspective exterior to them. If the version of the dialectic she presents is off the mark, that doesn't really undermine her choice to talk about hierarchies and wholes instead of contradiction and totality; if the redistribution she champions through an appeal to Marx mistakes his definition of communism as a definition of socialism, that doesn't make the question of "which forms of protest or resistance actually succeed at dismantling unjust, entrenched arrangements" any less worthwhile (18). To recall the discussion of reductionism with which I began, like the atomist cosmos of *De rerum natura* the world of *Forms* is a physics unto itself, its theory of the politics of form made up of impenetrable, unchanging concepts whose bonds are so strong that they repel assaults from without and within: "Haec neque dissolui plagis extrinsecus icta / possunt nec porro penitus penetrata retexi / nec ratione queunt alia temptata labare";[4] alternatively, "[f]orm is a weapon. It's something that can't be argued with" (Lucretius, book 1, lines 528–30; Kelsey, qtd. in Kraus 49).

By invoking "disagreement" I mean to heed Levine's recommendation to "draw . . . on the work of Jacques Rancière," the notable theorist of "politics as a matter of distributions and arrangements" and of the indecorous posture of dissensus (3). If I'm unsettled by *Forms*, it's because the almost authoritarian inflexibility of its predicates seems to defend the book preemptively against objection, inquiry, or debate—a strategy of deterrence not unrelated to its twinned solicitation and brush-off of something Levine refers to as "Marx's dialectical materialism" (18). What would it mean to disagree with *Forms*? If the book's own form is more literary than critical, no serious disagreement is possible, since the epistemic frame of the book and that of its interlocutors may at best only partially overlap. What Rancière says of realism as an ideological configuration nicely pinpoints the aesthetic milieu *Forms* shares with the television dramas and Victorian novels that furnish occasions for its "close but not deep" close readings (Levine 23). Extending a familiar critique of Hegel, Rancière writes:

> Realism claims to be that sane attitude of mind that sticks to observable realities. It is in fact something quite different: it is the police logic of order, which asserts, in all circumstances, that it is only doing the only thing possible to do. The consensus system has ab-

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> sorbed the historical and objective necessity of former times, reduced to the congruous portion of the "only thing possible" that the circumstances authorize. The possible is thereby the conceptual exchanger of "reality" and "necessity": It is also the final mode of "truth" that metapolitics perfected can offer the logic of the police order, the truth of the impossibility of the impossible. Realism is the absorption of all reality and all truth in the category of the only thing possible. (132)

To reckon fully with the power of *Forms*, we will need to think about the apparent synthesis of "reality" and "necessity" that makes this book's argument seem at once self-evident and unimpeachable, always right on its own terms and prohibitive of all others.

"Form, for our purposes, will mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference." This book is a big country, to which almost everything would appear to belong. What happens, I wonder, to the thought it makes impossible, that it expels in order to prevail?

Notes

1. For a pertinent etiology of the list, see Nealon 48, 51–53.

2. Levine's response to our essay appears in *Critical Inquiry* ("Still Polemicizing"), as does our response to her response ("Forms"). The present essay was written before I read what Levine had to say about our account of reductionism in *Forms*. In the interest of keeping the two conversations separate, I have not revised this piece substantively since then.

3. Kristin Ross provides a moving account of the complex, sometimes unpredictable trajectories of this distinction and their resonance today (106–11).

4. "These can neither be broken by blows from without, nor pierced and unraveled within, nor give way to any other sort of attack" (my trans.).

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