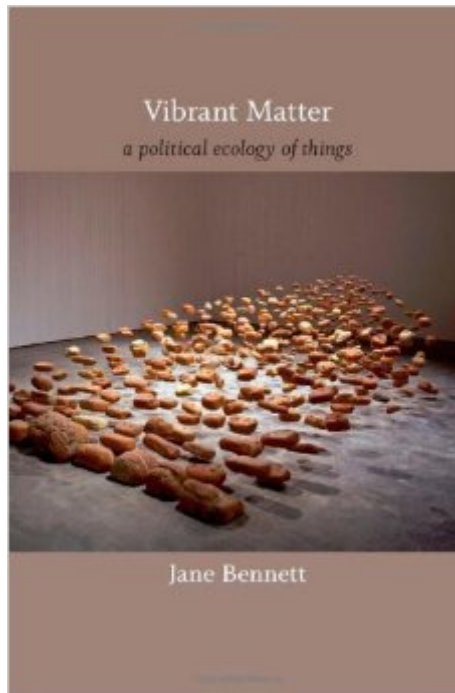


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Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology Of Things (a John Hope Franklin Center Book)



Synopsis

In *Vibrant Matter* the political theorist Jane Bennett, renowned for her work on nature, ethics, and affect, shifts her focus from the human experience of things to things themselves. Bennett argues that political theory needs to do a better job of recognizing the active participation of nonhuman forces in events. Toward that end, she theorizes a "vital materiality" that runs through and across bodies, both human and nonhuman. Bennett explores how political analyses of public events might change were we to acknowledge that agency always emerges as the effect of ad hoc configurations of human and nonhuman forces. She suggests that recognizing that agency is distributed this way, and is not solely the province of humans, might spur the cultivation of a more responsible, ecologically sound politics: a politics less devoted to blaming and condemning individuals than to discerning the web of forces affecting situations and events. Bennett examines the political and theoretical implications of vital materialism through extended discussions of commonplace things and physical phenomena including stem cells, fish oils, electricity, metal, and trash. She reflects on the vital power of material formations such as landfills, which generate lively streams of chemicals, and omega-3 fatty acids, which can transform brain chemistry and mood. Along the way, she engages with the concepts and claims of Spinoza, Nietzsche, Thoreau, Darwin, Adorno, and Deleuze, disclosing a long history of thinking about vibrant matter in Western philosophy, including attempts by Kant, Bergson, and the embryologist Hans Driesch to name the "vital force" inherent in material forms. Bennett concludes by sketching the contours of a "green materialist" ecophilosophy.

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Customer Reviews

I recently taught Jane Bennett's book "Vibrant Matter" in a class on Environmental Theory, and I found it intriguing, challenging, and completely rewarding. My students really seemed to enjoy grappling with Bennett's concepts and the way she weaves a variety of texts and examples together throughout the chapters. Even when Bennett's questions are left unanswered, this is a productive tactic: many of my students took up her open-ended questions in their papers, extending her observations and complex formulations and applying them to local matters. Bennett's book worked very well alongside Timothy Morton's book "The Ecological Thought," Jennifer Price's book "Flight Maps," Arun Agrawal's book "Environmentality," Kathleen Stewart's "Ordinary Affects," and Donna Haraway's book "When Species Meet" (among a few other shorter texts that we read in between these). While definitely demanding at times, the narrative of "Vibrant Matter" is so articulated and strong that the book stands out as a philosophical/theoretical *story*, of sorts. (This was another aspect of the book that made it very teachable.) Bennett's book is speculative and picaresque, but absolutely rigorous and totally genuine. "Vibrant Matter" may frustrate readers looking for step-by-step instructions for a 'political ecology' -- but if readers want a fantastic book to think with, a book that piques philosophical imagination and merges it with ecology, then "Vibrant Matter" is it.

I had thought that the point of political theory is to reflect on and improve real-world politics. This book presents political theory as something to be hung in a Tribeca loft and made the subject of bon mots - preferably borrowed from French literary theorists. I was moved to read the book in the context of the March 2011 tsunami that struck the northern coast of Japan. I myself saw the devastation there during a subsequent visit, and, like many people here, have been wondering about what new direction Japan might take in light of it. A passage in the author's (JB's) preface looked promising: "Because politics is itself often construed as an exclusively human domain ... I will emphasize, even overemphasize the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces ... in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought. We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism - the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature - to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world" (@xvi). This turned out to be the last page I flagged. Later on, JB asks exactly the question I had in mind: "What would happen to our thinking about nature if we experienced materialities as actants [a term JB borrows from Bruno Latour, whose

characteristic will-to-cleverness seems to inspire JB throughout], and how would the direction of public policy shift if it attended more carefully to their trajectories and powers?" (@62). The failure of the book is that no attempt is made to answer this second question. As a philosophical rumination, the book does venture into some interesting territory. JB's discussion of a Kafka story I didn't know, "Cares of a Family Man" (Ch. 1) was surprising and delightful, and her analysis of the vitalisms of Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch (Ch. 5) reminds the reader about forgotten theories that apparently were very popular in early 20th century America. Chapter 7 does contain some actual discussion of political theory, focusing on John Dewey and Jacques Rancière. But the closest JB comes to an application of her theme is to ask "what if" Rancière's theory of democracy as the "power [of people, who speak and deliberate] to disrupt" were opened up to include non-human and even inanimate agencies (a suggestion Rancière himself has negated) (@106-108). Again, intriguing question - but no attempt made to answer it. Unfortunately, these tidbits are embedded in a jargon-filled exposition that is constantly quoting French theorists like Latour, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, or else JB's Johns Hopkins colleague William Connolly, among a multitude of others. Even her discussion of Spinoza relies as much on interpretations of him by Deleuze and others as on her own. When she follows, throughout, D&G in using the word "assemblage" to refer to a mélange of animate beings, inanimate objects and materials, and reified abstractions (e.g. @ 25), it brings to mind the term's more usual context: a sticker on an art gallery wall. (Betraying a preference for literary theory over literature, JB ignores mid-20th Century French poet Francis Ponge, most famous for his many prose poems about the "vibrant" properties of things -- *Le savon* [Soap], *Le parti pris des choses* [The Bias of Things], etc. One might have expected more sympathy for such "bias," not only because of JB's Francophilia but since she herself is actually a "Chair," albeit of the Political Science Department at Johns Hopkins University.) I suspect many fans of this book would have fallen for the Sokal Hoax. While I support the notion one needn't have a Ph.D. in science to be qualified to comment on science, this book is full of the loopy sorts of references that physicist Alan Sokal sneaked into a literary theory journal whose editors thought him serious. One example is a Deleuze quote referring to "two equally actual powers, that of acting, and that of suffering action, which vary inversely one to the other, but whose sum is both constant and constantly effective" (@21): work that out with a little high school calculus and you'll find that neither "power" can vary at all. Elsewhere she credits Deleuze & Guattari, in a work first published in France in 1980, with "anticipating more recent work in contemporary complexity theory, posit[ing] a mode of becoming that is both material and creative, rather than mechanical and equilibrium maintaining" (@60) To the extent this description can be connected to "contemporary

complexity theory," only a time warp could allow a 1980 book to "anticipate" work in nonequilibrium thermodynamics done in the 1950s by the Belgium-based Nobelist Ilya Prigogine (unmentioned in this book). [POSTSCRIPT 2013/02/17: I should mention that "contemporary complexity theory" is an ambiguous reference. There's also the Santa Fe Institute vision of it, a/k/a the theory of "complex adaptive systems," which got its first funding from Citibank in the late 1980s. The SFI folks have a different emphasis from Prigogine, and rarely cite to papers from his school. However, both schools can lead to similar broad-brush conclusions, and popular writing -- unless by an SFI author, such as Eric Beinhocker, Brian Arthur, Stuart Kauffman, etc. -- rarely distinguishes between them. See, e.g., R. McIntosh et al., eds., "Complexity and Organization" (Routledge 2006), which freely moves between the two schools. JB's assertion in the text under review is so general and uninformative that it's hard to be certain which complexity theory she's talking about or in what sense it is being "anticipated"; but her references to "becoming" and denial of equilibrium echo Prigogine's themes. See, e.g., his 1980 popularization, "From Being to Becoming" (W.H. Freeman, pub.). Even in the alternative case, the SFI version of complexity theory rests on 1960s/70s chaos theory, discrete-time cellular automata (developed in the 1940s and first popularized by no later than 1970) and especially Charles Darwin's "The Origin of Species" (1859), so this would be tough to anticipate in 1980, too.] And while JB thrills at the "quivering" of "free atoms" in the interstices between crystalline domains in metals (@59), it never occurs to her that the atoms in the crystals themselves "quiver" too, as a college physics textbook will inform you. One of the most striking and damning points about the book, especially considering how heavily reliant it is on Continental theory (though JB cites only to works in English translation), is the particular spin JB gives to the phrase "political ecology". Readers familiar with *l'écologie politique* will find that JB is referring to something entirely different. For JB, an "ecology" is "an interconnected series of parts, but not a fixed order of parts" (@97; BTW one is never told why it is a "series" rather than, say, an "ensemble"). A "political ecology" is not defined explicitly, but JB quotes with approval Latour's comment that "The most urgent concern for us today is to see how to fuse together humans and non-humans in the same hybrid forums and open, as fast as possible, this Parliament of things" (@104 & 150n23). Contrast that silliness with the *écologie politique* developed since the 1960s by such Continental thinkers as Hans Jonas, Jürgen Habermas, André Gorz, Ivan Illich, Emmanuel Levinas and others, e.g. as lucidly summarized in Eva Sas's recent *Philosophie de l'écologie politique* (Les Petits Matins 2010). (Exactly zero of these authors are mentioned in JB's book.) According to Sas, this doctrine starts from environmental concerns but builds to a more general political philosophy based on the principles of responsibility, autonomy,

solidarity and participative democracy. Agree or disagree, that's something you can sink your teeth into. Compared to Sas's book and those of the authors mentioned in it, JB's book is empty game-playing. Two stars, for being more like the facetious work of tipsy grad students than a serious one by the poli sci chairperson at a major university. Or so one would have hoped.

I think this book--maybe more than any other--set the bar for the new work on vitalist materialism and object oriented ontology. It is not necessarily the most integrative book you will read on vital matter. It drifts around and some of the author's commitments are only sketched out and then--later--loosely realized, or just generally affirmed. But her overall claims and direct approach kept coming back to me. I've used this book in an advanced seminar and the students took to it more quickly than I did. I think it set the tone for work that was to come. An important read--and fun to think through.

Such a wonderful book. Jane Bennett has changed my views on "things" in a most profound way that has affected both my scholarship and my personal attitude toward the world of materials.

I don't agree with everything that Bennett says, but I do believe that *Vibrant Matter* encapsulates some of the most important (and most practical) applications of the object-oriented movement to date. Her discussion of the politics of the 2003 blackout, for instance, truly shows why thinking about matter as having agency matters. It's all-too-easy to try to locate fault within the consciousness of (usually one) person. Bennett shows us how metal, worms, and other seemingly non-human things effect our everyday lives. This is a vital book for the future of philosophy and political theory.

The book raises presents a productive argument for envisioning how we might see material life so that our actions and deeds can be more positively accountable. Rather than other books on ecology that are staked in jargon, Bennett seems to open up issues so that we are thinking with and in life and its affects/effects. It is a great book on sustainability and how to create sustainability.

Uses Karen Barad's theory of Agential Realism. Thoughtful research.

The book arises from an interesting premise, that of reformulating the claims of vitalism in a new light as a political project. But that's about as far as it gets: The human component is completely absent in the book, and eventually the project consists in learning to address the "demands" of

object assemblages by developing "new methods of perception". I am sorry to say that this sounds like using things as mere sensors for the well being of humans. Ultimately I found the book to be full of flaws and unable (except on a nice chapter on metals) to affecting me or the classmates that read it in an emotional or political level.

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