The jargon of finitude
Or, materialism today

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To ask about materialism today means to ask about the time of materialism. This can be taken in at least two different senses. First, we can take the expression to imply a rephrasing of the larger question ‘What is materialism?’ as ‘When is materialism?’ and ask: When was the time of materialism – whether ancient (Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius) or modern (perhaps Hobbes, certainly d’Holbach, Marx)? When will be the time of materialism (again)? And, in between that noble past and unknowable future, is today, perhaps, a good time for returning to the question ‘What is materialism?’ Indeed, is now the time of materialism, not just in the sense of our here and now, but ‘the now’ as such? Does the time of materialism, whenever it happens, which may be rare, always mark the time of now, against the timeless, ahistorical or eternal lucubrations of idealism? This last formulation hints at the second main way in which the question may be understood, namely: What is time when seen from a materialist point of view, as opposed – presumably – to an idealist one?

These two takes on ‘the time of materialism’, while setting different agendas, are also obviously related. Any serious study of the time and history of materialism is bound, sooner or later, to have to come to terms with materialist conceptions of history and time.

However, the conjunction of materialism with the thinking of time was not always self-evident. Seeing titles such as ‘The Time of Materiality’ or ‘Materialism Today’, I myself have felt an urge to regard the conjunction with a great deal of – what I presume to be materialist – suspicion. This suspicion is due not to some hidden impossibility of the conjunction, but rather to the impression of an all-too-easy, underthematized or unproblematic possibility. Time appears to have become the object of a consensus of history and time.

Time and untimeliness; temporality and overlapping or alternative temporalities; other times and the time of the other; time both originary and derivative, messianic and fallen, plastic and irreversible; time as history, historicality and historicity…. No matter which way you turn, it would seem, now is the time of time. Time is ‘in’, we might say, because despite of, or perhaps due to, the ubiquitous affirmations that ‘the time is out of joint’, there seems to be no way not to be ‘in’ time – on the condition that we do not mistake this being ‘in’ time for the image of a ‘container’, ‘channel’ or ‘dimension’ out there, through which we pass like other entities of nature, unperturbed by the fundamental temporality of being. Thus, as Heidegger writes at the end of his History of the Concept of Time, Time is not something which is found outside somewhere as a framework for world events. Time is even less something which whirs away inside in consciousness…. The movements of nature which we define spatio-temporally, these movements do not flow off ‘in time’ as ‘in’ a channel. They are as such completely time-free. They are encountered ‘in’ time only insofar as their being is discovered as pure nature. They are encountered ‘in’ the time which we ourselves are.1

We are not ‘in’ time so much as our innermost being ‘is’ time. It is in this last sense that time and temporality seem to have become inescapable for philosophy.

Jorge Luis Borges, a self-described ‘Argentine adrift on the sea of metaphysics’, seems to have anticipated large parts of this consensus when in the melancholy conclusion to his magnificently titled ‘New Refutation of Time’ he wrote:

To deny temporal succession, to deny the ego, to deny the astronomical universe, are apparent despairations and secret consolations. Our destiny (unlike the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not horrible because of its unreality; it is horrible because it is irreversible and iron-bound. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is
a river that carries me away, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.²

Regardless of Borges's admitted idealist commitments, it is not difficult to understand some of the reasons why the fiery substance of such an all-consuming view of time might come to be tied to a materialist perspective. Only a painstaking attention to the muddy grounds of time and history, so the general assumption seems to hold, will be able to stave off the lofty idealist and metaphysical temptation to understand the order of things as eternal, unchanging and unchangeable. The basic directive for the contemporary materialist would thus be the one that serves as the opening motto to Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*: ‘Always historicize!’³ At a more fundamental level, this also means: ‘Always temporalize!’ Or, to return to my more unlikely bedfellow, it would seem that the principal task in thinking the time of materialism, in the double sense outlined above, lies in conceiving what Borges calls a ‘history of eternity’, the first principle of which requires a reversal of the traditional – again we could say idealist and metaphysical – understanding of the relation between time and eternity, inherited from Plato:

For us, time is a jarring, urgent problem, perhaps the most vital problem of metaphysics, while eternity is a game or a spent hope. We read in Plato’s *Timaeus* that time is a moving image of eternity, and it barely strikes a chord, distracting no one from the conviction that eternity is an image wrought in the substance of time. I propose to give a history of that image, that awkward word enriched by human discord.⁴

Thus, even if we continue to ignore the troubling evidence of Borges’s undeniable idealism, to be a materialist today would imply thinking eternity on the ground of the substance of time, and not the other way around.

To speak of the time of materialism, then, is well nigh redundant, inasmuch as only a thinking of time qua time seems capable of laying claims on the title of being materialist. This certainly has not always been the case. Several years ago, I argued that to be a materialist required a paradigm shift ‘from time to space’ or (what at the time seemed to be another way of saying the same thing) ‘from text to territory.’⁵ In making this argument, I was following a lead not just from Jameson – our quintessential historicizer who somewhat ironically also argues that to write the ontology of our present (including the history of postmodernism) requires that we embrace a certain ‘spatial turn’ – but also from Michel Foucault, who, in an important interview with the editors of the French journal *Hérodote*, suggested that the categories of time tend to invite a phenomenological interrogation, the underlying model for which continues to be – despite all the steps back, the bracketings and the reductions of intentionality – that of consciousness; whereas the categories of space, placement, territory and so on force us to take into account the structural constraints put on discourse by the non-discursive.

‘Metaphorizing the transformations of discourse in a vocabulary of time necessarily leads to the utilization of the model of individual consciousness with its intrinsic temporality’, Foucault told his interviewers. ‘Endeavouring on the other hand to decipher discourse through the use of spatial, strategic metaphors enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through and on the basis of relations of power.’⁶ A spatial model, in other words, would enable a whole new cartography of discursive events in relation to institutional practices of power and resistance, removing the question of subjectivation from the idealist grip of the phenomenological model of consciousness, intentionality, and experience.

Even a shift from time to space, however, may be insufficient to overcome some of the more stifling consequences of the current consensus surrounding the question of time and its alleged materialism. This is why, in an effort to put all my polemical cards on the table, I would propose that it is time to argue against time, by tackling what I perceive to be the minimal common denominator behind both time and space, as soon as they are seen as the *a priori* forms of our intuition after Kant: namely, the underlying assumption, which today has become a new dogma, that the task of thinking – whether it is called criticism, analysis, theory or philosophy – consists ultimately in nothing less but also nothing more than the exposure of, and our exposure to, finitude.

‘Not only is human intuition finite, but also, and perhaps in a far more original way, is thinking finite’, Heidegger writes. Or again: ‘*Finite thinking* is a tautology, after the fashion of a round circle.’⁷ This is, then, the tautology to be disrupted and the circle to be broken. The point is not to argue against time as such, which would be reckless. Rather, what I seek to interrupt is the chain of equivalences according to which time is to eternity as materialism is to idealism and finitude to infinity. In other words, the argument is against time as the primordial mode of access to a thinking of finitude that today has become the dominant form of a new idealism, parading in the
guise of a radical, post-metaphysical, anti-dialectical and hyper-ethical form of materialism.

Finitude, which once had the critical virtue of fending off the twin errors of blind dogmatism and empty empiricism, has today become a new dogma that risks keeping the empirical from ever being transformed. Conversely, infinity, which once – in its virtual rather than its actual form – was inseparable from the idealist vagaries of theology, is perhaps the only materialist answer to the jargon of finitude today – provided we understand what this implies about the definitions of materialism and idealism.

**For the time being (finitude’s dogma)**

From Martin Heidegger to Jacques Derrida to Roberto Esposito, from Paul Ricoeur to Jacques Taminiaux to Françoise Dastur, or even from Theodor W. Adorno to Slavoj Žižek, there is a seemingly endless list of contemporary thinkers who, for the past several decades, in innumerable variations, have orchestrated a vast performance of what Avital Ronell called ‘finitude’s score’.8 Heidegger’s interpretation of finitude in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* is without a doubt the single most important moment in this gigantic intergenerational effort that spans almost the entire twentieth century. In the process, finitude receives a decisively new twist. Instead of interpreting finitude primarily in terms of death and mortality, as is the case in *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s turn to the *Critique of Pure Reason* allows him to develop the view that, as the innermost character of the human being or Dasein, finitude in fact involves an essential relation not to this one life, being or entity and their possible end, but to the very question of being qua being, which is and always has been the only question worthy of that which Heidegger here still calls ‘metaphysics’ or ‘fundamental ontology’.

Heidegger’s retrieval and development of Kant’s *Critique* thus leads the discussion of finitude in the direction of the ground of metaphysics:

*This development has to show the extent to which the problem of the finitude in human beings and the investigations it prescribes necessarily belong to the mastering of the Question of Being. Stated basically: the essential connection between Being as such (not the being) and the finitude in human beings must be brought to light…. Now it appears: we do not even need first to ask about a relationship between the understanding of Being and the finitude in human beings, that it itself is the innermost essence of finitude. With that, however, we have attained the very concept of finitude which is taken as the basis for a problematic of the laying of the ground for metaphysics.*9

Soon afterward, starting in the 1930s, Heidegger abandoned both of these terms – ‘metaphysics’ and ‘fundamental ontology’ – in favour of an understanding of ‘thinking’ that is at once more generic and more enigmatic, but serves as a name for ways of retrieving the question of being that would not be metaphysical. In fact, it is precisely the notion of finitude, once the place of its inscription is moved from the mortal human being onto Being itself and ultimately onto ‘the event’, which alone enables and subsequently continues to guarantee the radical possibility of a post-metaphysical mode of thinking.

If Heidegger inaugurates the paradigm of finitude through his repetition of Kant, it belongs to Foucault, in the final section of *The Order of Things* on ‘Man and His Doubles’, to have demonstrated the all-encompassing impact of such a paradigm on modernity as a whole. What Foucault, following Heidegger, calls an ‘analytic of finitude’ marks for him the very threshold between the classical age and modernity, or between our prehistory and what we consider contemporary. ‘[O]ur culture crossed the threshold beyond which we recognize our modernity when finitude was conceived in an interminable cross-reference with itself’, Foucault writes. ‘Modern culture can conceive of man because it conceives of the finite on the basis of itself’.10 The modern humanities or human sciences, in particular, are unthinkable without crossing such a threshold into an understanding of the finite without infinity; that is, of finitude outside the metaphysical and most often theological schemas that oppose the finite to the infinite, on the model of creatures and their Creator.

Among the many aspects worth highlighting in this modern interpretation of the notion of finitude, I will single out only two. The first involves a complete overthrow of the stubborn pejorative connotations that intuitively cling to this notion, understood as either defect or lack, limitation or shortcoming. For Heidegger as well as for Foucault, on the contrary, finitude alone is what first opens up the possibility of asking the questions of being, of truth, or of knowing as such. Alphonse de Waellens and Walter Biemel, the translators of the French version of Heidegger’s *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* – which Foucault most certainly had before him when composing *The Order of Things* – write:

*Instead of thought and knowledge being considered as an accession to the absolute which, in man, finds itself accidentally hindered in delivering its full effects, instead of holding this hindrance to be an extrinsic or purely negative limitation, now it is a*
question of bringing to light finitude as the positive structure and the essence itself of knowing.\textsuperscript{11}

Foucault, for his part, discusses three dominant and vaguely successive modalities by which finitude doubles back upon itself so as to uncover in its very limitations the positive conditions of possibility for knowledge and truth to begin with. These modalities are, respectively, the redoubling of the empirical and the transcendental; the double of the cogito and the unconscious, or of thinking and the unthought; and the retreat and the return of origin. In each of these three cases, the thinking of the finite, or finite thinking as round circle and tautology, is severed from all references to the infinite:

The experience taking form at the beginning of the nineteenth century situates the discovery of finitude not within the thought of the infinite, but at the very heart of those contents that are given, by the finite act of knowing, as the concrete forms of finite existence. Hence the interminable to and fro of a double system of reference: if man's knowledge is finite, it is because he is trapped, without possibility of liberation, within the positive contents of language, labour, and life; and inversely, if life, labour, and language may be posited in their positivity, it is because knowledge has finite forms.\textsuperscript{12}

It is in this sense that the 'analytic of finitude', standing at the threshold of a modernity from which we would not yet have been able to escape, breaks completely with the classical 'metaphysics of infinity' that preceded it.

With the jettisoning of all references to the infinite, whether metaphysical, dialectical or straightforwardly theological, we come upon the second major element in the paradigm of finite thinking: its critical and (or so it is assumed) anti-metaphysical, anti-dogmatic or even anti-idealistic leverage. To quote de Waelhens and Biemel once more: 'To link the understanding of being and man's finitude, to write a metaphysics of finitude [in the sense of the term that Heidegger would later abandon], this also means to forbid oneself to ever invert the roles by making this metaphysics, surreptitiously or not, into an absolute knowledge of the finite, proclaimed true in itself.'\textsuperscript{13} Or, as Heidegger himself writes: 'all philosophizing, being a human activity, is incomplete, finite and restricted. Even philosophy as knowledge of the whole must be content and give up the idea of grasping the whole at a stroke.'\textsuperscript{14} Finally, it is this same anti-metaphysical potential that Foucault discovers in the modern analytic of finitude which is at work in human sciences such as biology, political economy and philology:

Modern thought, then, will contest even its own metaphysical impulses, and show that reflections upon life, labour, and language, in so far as they have value as analytics of finitude, express the end of metaphysics: the philosophy of life denounces metaphysics as a veil of illusion, that of labour denounces it as an alienated form of thought and an ideology, that of language as a cultural episode.\textsuperscript{15}

Now, if I may be allowed the use of mixed metaphors, here is where I would like to throw a small wrench into the machine, break the tautological circle of finite thinking, and sound a shrill note of dissonance in the midst of the chorus of philosophers who sing the praise of finitude as if therein also would lie the hard kernel of a postmetaphysical materialism. This also presupposes, however, that we redefine what is understood by materialism and idealism today.

The materialist return of eternity

The paradox inherent in materialist thinking is obvious enough: how can we claim at the same time both to be materialist and to operate at the level of thought? How can we think matter without automatically becoming idealist? The usual answer to this paradox has been to posit that the thought of materialism requires an interruption of thinking – to posit that matter somewhere breaks with thought by marking a point of the real, which alone is what matters, within thought. Or, to put it the other way around, a materialist philosophy must necessarily double back the powers of the concept so as to reflect the non-conceptual within the concept. Materialism, in this sense, attacks idealism from the inside by marking the latter's finitude. The Parmenidean fragment according to which 'the same, indeed, is thinking and being' thus not only serves as the founding principle of all Western metaphysics – as a Heideggerian, Derridean or even Adornian tradition would hold – but can also be read as the originary
culmination of idealism, in so far as a materialist and post-metaphysical mode of thinking must be able to reflect upon the limit where thinking, indeed, is not the same as being.

And yet, given the outcome of the attacks on idealism from the point of finitude, no contemporary materialism can afford to abandon the thesis of the identity of thinking and being. In fact, if today difference, finitude or non-identity only come to substitute the principle of identity as a (new) law of thinking (about) being, as a law of thinking (about) matter, then we can be sure to have entered idealism. Idealism, then, must also be redefined, not as the affirmation of the supremacy of thought over matter but as the undivided acceptance that the relation between the two is precisely of the order of the law, rather than the event.

Following the theses of Alain Badiou in a pivotal section of *Theory of the Subject*, materialism would have to be defined twice: first in terms of being (all that exists is matter, whence it follows that there is only one name of being) and then a second time in terms of the process by which we come to know being (a process which, as Badiou’s teacher Louis Althusser never tired of repeating, involves a clear distinction between matter and thought, or between the real and knowledge of the real, which presupposes that there are actually two regions of being, under the primacy of the first). Metaphorically, this double determination of materialism can be summed up in the ‘mirror’ that functions as the metaphor for knowledge in the notorious reflection theory, and the ‘asymptote’ which from Engels to Lacan metaphorizes knowledge from the point of view of the remainder left behind by all exact reflection. ‘Let us say that for materialism reflection is the metaphor of the thesis of identity’, Badiou concludes: ‘The second metaphor mathematizes the thesis of primacy into an asymptote.’

In the current theoretical and philosophical situation, this asymptotic approach, which insists on the structural necessity of some leftover, a stubborn difference or an indivisible remainder, has become completely dominant to the detriment of the universally vilified reflection theory of knowledge. Philosophical materialism has become reduced to the postulate of a constitutive gap between being (matter) and thinking (knowledge) for which finitude often serves as the ontologically dignified name or shorthand notation.

When thinking can be no more than the exposure of and to finitude without falling in the traps of an idealist, metaphysical or dogmatic illusion, however, then any attempt to change that which finitude exposes is also by definition blocked in advance. Thinking as finite thinking thus sustains its radicality only by showing that at least it does not make the mistake of having confidence in, let alone act upon, some notion of infinity. Or, to put it differently, it is the analytic of finitude for which all appeals to the actual infinite must by definition be seen as disastrous – an impending disaster that is often referred to in the moralizing language of ‘the worst’, with radicalism consisting in at least having avoided all that.

So if idealism can be defined as granting antecedence not to mind over matter so much as to the law over the interruption of the law, then the paradigm of finitude which we find in the critique or deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence perhaps no less than in negative dialectics, by positing the finitude of truth and knowledge as a new law, has in fact become idealist. ‘The indivisibility of the law of the place exempts it from the real. To link up this exception in the domain of theory amounts to stipulating the radical anteriority of the rule’, Badiou writes. ‘The position of this antecedence is elaborated in philosophy as idealism.’

Against this idealism, what needs to be affirmed is the infinite not as a virtual progression, nor as an
asymptotically approachable beyond, but as the name for the immanent excess of the finite over its own resources: ‘It is this immanent creative power, this indestructible capacity to overstep boundaries, which is the infinite as quality of the finite.’ Finally, in contrast with the power of time to signal the analytic of finitude, this affirmation could be interpreted as a call to consider at the very least the possibility that eternity, against the grain of every accepted form of wisdom today, contains the seeds for a secular and materialist return of the infinite as the power to break with the bounds of finitude.

For this reason, I will leave the last word to Borges, who ends his own ‘History of Eternity’ with the following mysterious and astonishingly simple formulation: ‘I derive, in advance, the conclusion: life is too impoverished not to be immortal [la vida es demasiado pobre para no ser inmortal].’ Immortality here could describe the nature of a subject capable of sustaining, without any transcendence, the eternalizing powers of the infinite within the situation of life as it is. Except that Borges, returning to the dogmatic slumber of finitude as it lies revealed in the irreducible link between thinking and time, immediately adds: ‘But we lack even the certainty of our own poverty, given that time, which is easily refutable by the senses, is not so easily refuted by the intellect, from whose essence the concept of succession appears inseparable.’ The disjunction should be clear enough: either we remain within the bounds of time as a unique resource for the analytic of finitude, in which case we cannot even be certain of the poverty of life, or else we try to overturn the analytic of finitude, with its uncertain redoubling of the poverty of philosophy into a philosophy of poverty, by following the consequences that derive from the secularization of infinity.

Notes

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8. Avital Ronell, Finitude’s Score: Essays for the End of the Millennium, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1998. Jean-Luc Nancy is without a doubt the clearest exponent of the doctrine of finitude, in A Finite Thinking, trans. Simon Sparks, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003. I address several of the finitists, particularly in their reading of Hegel’s dialectic, in ‘Hegel in America’, in Clayton Crockett, Creston Davis and Slavoj Žižek, eds, Religion, Politics, and the Dialectic: Hegel and the Opening of the Infinite, Columbia University Press, New York, forthcoming. I am aware that both Žižek and some of his colleagues in Ljubljana, especially Alenka Zupančič, in recent years have begun pursuing the infinite as part of a critique of the finitist argument, even though Žižek from time to time will still pull the old stick out of his closet so as to beat Badiou over the head for his blindness to the proper place of finitude and the death drive in any theory of the subject. Zupančič, for example, devotes a crucial section of her The Odd One In: On Comedy (MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2008) to the argument in favour of the ‘physics of the infinite’ over and against the ‘metaphysics of the finite’. Within the phenomenological-deconstructive camp, on the other hand, there is also no shortage of invocations of the infinite, from Emmanuel Levinas’s Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority (trans. Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh,
to Simon Critchley’s *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (Verso, London and New York, 2007). The true dividing line, however, runs between ‘actual’ infinity and infinity either as theological transcendence or as regulative Idea. The latter of these uses, which may well claim to be materialist, is in actual fact perfectly compatible with the kind of overarching finitist frame that is targeted here. By contrast, for the revolutionary importance of the (Cantorian) idea of actual infinity, see Alain Badiou, “Philosophy and Mathematics, Infinity and the End of Romanticism”, in *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano, Continuum, London 2004, pp. 21–38. ‘We do not possess the wherewithal to be atheists so long as the theme of finitude governs our thinking’, Badiou claims. ‘Only by relating the infinite back to a neutral banality, by inscribing eternity in the matheme alone, by simultaneously abandoning historicism and finitude, does it become possible to think within a radically deconsecrated realm’ (pp. 26–7).


20. Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano, Polity, Cambridge 2007, p. 158. Badiou is reading the section ‘Quantity’ in Hegel’s *The Science of Logic*: ‘The synthetic definition proposed by Hegel (I will borrow his vocabulary here) is that (the quantum’s) infinity comes to be when the act of self-overcoming is once again taken up into itself. Hegel adds that in this moment the infinite exceeds the sphere of the quantitative and becomes qualitative’ (ibid., p. 157).

21. Borges, ‘History of Eternity’, p. 13. Badiou ends ‘Philosophy and Mathematics’ by claiming that ‘in banishing every instance of the sacred and the void of every God, mathematics is nothing but the human history of eternity’ (p. 38). This is also how Badiou elsewhere describes his ‘Formal Theory of the Subject (Meta-physics)’, with its different subjective figures (faithful, obscure, reactive) and destinations (production, denial, occultation, resurrection): ‘Taken in its entirety, the schema of figures and destinations is thus a circulation of the present, which is to say an empirical historicization of the eternity of truths’, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2, trans. Alberto Toscano, Continuum, London, 2009, p. 67.