

## Research Article

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# Malabou's Political Critique of Speculative Realism

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**Abstract:** A recent political critique of Speculative Realism by Catherine Malabou finds fault with this loosely arranged movement for its focus on reality in its own right, apart from the subject. Malabou responds with a radical ontological claim, holding effectively – if not always explicitly – that subject and object mutually generate one another amidst a primal void. After criticizing this idea, I point to some of the difficult political consequences of such a position, though Malabou defines it positively as an anarchic awakening that generates new collectivities unconstrained by any thing-in-itself. By contrast, I contend that nonhuman constraints and collaborators are an intimate part of the human political sphere. More generally, it is shown that there are consequences for which sorts of relations are taken to be the primary political relations.

**Keywords:** Catherine Malabou, Speculative Realism, the void, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Bruno Latour

The French philosopher Catherine Malabou has been near the cutting edge of the continental tradition for several decades. Initially one of the most promising figures to emerge from the circle of Jacques Derrida, she quickly staked out her own intellectual terrain with books ranging from a powerful interpretation of Hegel to a novel account of “neuroplasticity” which treats the mind as neither a hard-wired mechanism nor a disembodied spirit untethered from all material constraint.<sup>1</sup> Malabou has also shown a willingness – rare among thinkers of her stature – to engage seriously with the efforts of younger authors, including those from outside the Francophone world. A fine example is her memorable collaboration with Adrian Johnston in *Self and Emotional Life*.<sup>2</sup> In 2014 she also engaged with Quentin Meillassoux in a stimulating piece entitled “Can We Relinquish the Transcendental?”<sup>3</sup> More recently, Malabou has published an article in French entitled “Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain” (“The Political Void of Contemporary Realism,” hereafter “The Political Void”).<sup>4</sup> This recent article is my topic, though I limit myself to considering the political friction it expresses with Speculative Realism. In one respect, Malabou is deeply alarmed by the political consequences of acknowledging a world-in-itself free of human subjects, and this divides her from Speculative Realism and its various models of a reality apart from us. Yet the disagreement itself is less important than what it illuminates: the fact that there are political consequences whenever an ontology takes one sort of relation to be more primary than others. Insofar as every philosophy highlights certain kinds of relations in the world while minimizing or outright forbidding others, every

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1 Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*; Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*

2 Johnston and Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life*.

3 Malabou, “Can We Relinquish the Transcendental?”

4 Malabou, “Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain.” All English translations from this article are the author’s own.

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philosophy faces a landscape of pre-verbal political options. I can hardly put it better than the anonymous Reviewer #1 of this article: “The form of the relation influences the contour of a political process.”

By now it is generally known that Speculative Realism was launched in April 2007 at an event of the same name at Goldsmiths, University of London.<sup>5</sup> Organized and moderated by Alberto Toscano, the event featured four speakers appearing in alphabetical order: Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, myself, and Quentin Meillassoux. In “The Political Void” Malabou briefly considers my ideas, then Brassier’s, then Meillassoux’s, confronting us with an anticipatory political challenge drawn in large part from the founder of structural Marxism, Louis Althusser.<sup>6</sup> Despite Grant’s absence from Malabou’s article, one is struck by her diligence in dealing with the Speculative Realists. With respect to my own work, Malabou zeroes in on two relatively obscure pieces that manage to encapsulate my philosophical position nicely: an article entitled “The Future of Continental Realism,” and a book chapter called “The Four Most Typical Objections to OOO,” with the latter abbreviation referring to Object-Oriented Ontology.<sup>7</sup> In Brassier’s case Malabou goes even further afield, digging up his little-known doctoral thesis from the University of Warwick (*Alien Theory*) which she pairs with his more widely read article “Concepts and Objects.”<sup>8</sup> Meillassoux is covered – less surprisingly – by way of *After Finitude*, which remains his major publication to date.<sup>9</sup>

## 1 Malabou on Speculative Realism

In Malabou’s account, the Speculative Realists – though she acknowledges the rapid collapse of the group as a collective project – are united by two shared principles. The first seems uncontroversial enough: their shared rejection of what Meillassoux calls “correlationism,” the view that we can never know thought without the world or the world without thought, but only the primordial relation between the two. For Meillassoux this notion begins with David Hume and Immanuel Kant, but extends throughout most of the tradition that follows: whether in the dialectical philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, or the *Sein-Dasein* correlate of Martin Heidegger.<sup>10</sup> If pre-Humean philosophy argued over who had the best model of substance, since Hume there has mostly been strife over who best conceives the structure of the thought-world correlate. For the Speculative Realists, correlationism is a lamentable development that ought to be opposed, and the respective thinkers of this current each pursues a different way of discussing the world as it is apart from thought. In a tradition as anti-realist in spirit as continental philosophy, this effort has provoked much resistance. Malabou expresses her own reservations as follows:

But whereas the realist affirms that the real only exists in de-correlated form, the materialist asks: what becomes of this subject once it is revoked? Does it purely and simply disappear from the real? Or is it only sutured, to adopt a term from [the Lacanian] Jacques-Alain Miller? Foreclosed but still visible despite being cut off?<sup>11</sup>

A clarification is already in order, given that my position on this point differs somewhat from those of Brassier and Meillassoux. As a rule, I have gladly enlisted in the fight against correlationism, and have been perfectly willing to adopt Meillassoux’s term as more concise and memorable than my own “philosophy of

<sup>5</sup> Brassier et al., “Speculative Realism.”

<sup>6</sup> Althusser, “Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre.”

<sup>7</sup> Harman, “The Future of Continental Realism;” Harman, “The Four Most Typical Objections to OOO.”

<sup>8</sup> Brassier, *Alien Theory*; Brassier, “Concepts and Objects.”

<sup>9</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

<sup>10</sup> Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition;” Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*; Husserl, *Logical Investigations*; Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

<sup>11</sup> Malabou, “Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain,” 486. The reference to Miller is to the 1966 article “La Suture.” “*Mais là où le réaliste affirme que le réel n'existe que décorrelée, le matérialiste demande: que devient le sujet une fois congédié? Disparaît-il purement et simplement de la scène du réel? Ou n'est-il, pour reprendre un terme de Jacques-Alain Miller, que 'suté'?* Forclos mais encore visible dans sa coupure?”

access.”<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Niki Young has published a convincing article in an earlier volume of this journal, arguing powerfully that I should maintain a distinction between the two terms.<sup>13</sup> For whereas Meillassoux is concerned primarily with the epistemological issue of how to subtract the thinking subject to get at the mathematized primary qualities of things themselves, my own attack on human access is ontological in flavor.

The reason is that I am not especially bothered by finitude, that great demon with which Meillassoux wrestles, but with “onto-taxonomy:” the typically modern view that there are basically two different kinds of realities: (1) human thought and (2) everything else.<sup>14</sup> Young, again, has further developed the critique of onto-taxonomy in a separate article.<sup>15</sup> What makes this worth mentioning is Malabou’s critique that for Speculative Realism “the real only exists in de-correlated form” is less to the point when it comes to my position than those of Brassier and Meillassoux.<sup>16</sup> For while Meillassoux actively seeks an “ancestral” or “diachronic” realm in which the subject is either not yet or no longer present, and Brassier is occupied with the nullity of human representation given the eventual extinction of our species, I retain the thought-world correlate as a hybrid entity, no less real than either thought or the world in isolation. This has perhaps been clearest in my critique of traditional aesthetic formalism of Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* and the early work of the art historian Michael Fried, who resemble Meillassoux in their efforts to subtract the “theatrical” human from the scene.<sup>17</sup> Stated more simply, I am less interested in “de-correlating” reality by subtracting the subject than in showing that even obvious correlates – such as the human–artwork relation – are themselves indissoluble units that cannot be reduced to a mere correlation of their human and non-human parts. For example, an individual beholder’s encounter with Picasso’s *Les demoiselles d’Avignon* is itself an impenetrable real object, just like the beholder or the painting taken in isolation. This has led some critics to complain – wrongly, it turns out – that I never manage to escape correlationism in the first place. This critique would only be relevant if we presuppose, with Meillassoux, that the root problem with correlation is its finitude. By contrast, I find fault with the correlate not for being finite, but for retaining as its sole principal ingredients a “thought” term and a “world” term. The point is not to eliminate finitude, but to show that not all relations consist of a thought-world pair, as Alfred North Whitehead did in the 1920s without having much of an effect.<sup>18</sup>

When it comes to Malabou’s second generalization about Speculative Realism, the tables are turned, since here she ascribes a position to the group as a whole that is actually found in my work alone. Namely: “All of the ‘new realists’ insist for example – but what an example! – on the fact that realism is not a materialism.”<sup>19</sup> This gets an important point right that is missed by many of my readers: the fact that object-oriented thought has nothing to do with materialism at all.<sup>20</sup> That is to say, the objects of OOO belong to the basically Aristotelian tradition of “substantial forms” that extends through the medieval period up to and including the thought of G. W. Leibniz. In more recent centuries “form” is usually treated as something coming from the side of the subject, while “matter” is associated with objects themselves. OOO refuses this tradition, treating objects (including those objects known as “subjects”) as consisting of nothing but an endless regress of forms. With the notable exception of Levi Bryant, OOO generally treats matter as a useless and deceptive concept designed to allow for an impossible passage of forms from their material substrate into the mind in undistorted fashion: as when Meillassoux holds that mathematics can

<sup>12</sup> Harman, “The Current State of Speculative Realism;” Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*.

<sup>13</sup> Young, “On Correlationism and the Philosophy of (Human) Access.”

<sup>14</sup> Harman, *Dante’s Broken Hammer*; Harman, “The Only Exit from Modern Philosophy.”

<sup>15</sup> Young, “Only Two Peas in a Pod.”

<sup>16</sup> Malabou, “Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain,” 486; “*le réel n’existe que décorrélé.*”

<sup>17</sup> Harman, *Art and Objects*; Kant, *Critique of Judgment*; Fried, “Art and Objecthood;” Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*.

<sup>18</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

<sup>19</sup> Malabou, “Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain,” 486. “*Tous les ‘réalistes nouveaux’ insistent par exemple – mais quel exemple! – sur le fait que le réalisme n’est pas un matérialisme.*”

<sup>20</sup> Harman, “I Am Also of the Opinion that Materialism Must Be Destroyed;” Harman, “Materialism Is Not the Solution;” Harman, “Realism Without Materialism.”

give us direct insight into the very structure of things.<sup>21</sup> Malabou is certainly right about OOO's hostility to matter, but wrong in her evident assumption that the other Speculative Realists share this hostility. Brassier remains deeply involved with a variant of scientific materialism, despite Malabou's intriguing reference to his dissertation's concept of a "materialism without matter." Grant, unmentioned in her article, can be read as a materialist in the rather different manner of F. W. J. Schelling and Gilles Deleuze.<sup>22</sup> And while Malabou is perfectly correct about Meillassoux's hostility to the usual sense of materialism, given its allegiance to mechanical necessity over the pure contingency he demands, he proudly regards himself as a speculative *materialist* even more than a speculative realist.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, when Malabou proclaims herself to be a "post-realist materialist," this puts her more at odds with my position than those of the other three Speculative Realists.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, her lament that Speculative Realism advocates "[a] brutal eclipse of the subject" does not apply univocally to the authors in this tradition.<sup>25</sup> For as already seen, OOO retains the human subject as an ingredient in many real objects, such as artworks and socio-political arrangements. Meillassoux upholds not only a rationalist model in which the subject is able to access reality directly, but also a quasi-Christian soteriology in which only the justice of the virtual God can surmount the grandeur of human thought.<sup>26</sup> And while Brassier openly regards humans as a measly and transient cosmic species, he at least treats humans as a species uniquely able to conceptualize its doom through admirable scientific procedures. Finally, for Grant, although the subject is no longer anything special, it is still an intimate part of nature's grand drama of production, since thoughts are "products" no less than the creations of nature itself are products.

## 2 Materialism and contingency

Having briefly summarized the views of the Speculative Realists, Malabou goes on to explain her own objections to realism and the nature of her type of materialism. She begins by summarizing Meillassoux's rejection of traditional materialism in the name of an absolute contingency of the laws of nature.<sup>27</sup> Her first complaint is that the old materialism is not really what Meillassoux thinks it is. At least since Marx, Malabou argues, "materialism has left the state of nature [...] it is no longer concerned solely with the movement of atoms or the problem of physical necessity, but also weaves both of these intimately together with political and social necessity."<sup>28</sup> This leads her to lament in passing that "the question of economic laws is not raised by any of the 'realists,' as if they were unworthy of the interest shown to physical laws alone."<sup>29</sup> This is reminiscent of Slavoj Žižek's complaint, against the opposite sort of threat, concerning "[t]he 'pure politics' of Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, and Étienne Balibar, more Jacobin than Marxist, [which] shares with its great opponent, Anglo-Saxon Cultural Studies and their focus on struggles for recognition, the degradation of the sphere of economy."<sup>30</sup> The point is worth mentioning insofar as both Žižek and Malabou appeal to economic reality, then ultimately deny it any place to exist in their radical conceptions of politics as a kind of retroactive subjective positing of reality. For Žižek, economics is wielded as a reality principle against

<sup>21</sup> Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*.

<sup>22</sup> Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*.

<sup>23</sup> Malabou, "Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain," 489–91. See Meillassoux, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition."

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 486.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* "[un] éclipse brutale du sujet."

<sup>26</sup> Meillassoux, "Appendix: Excerpts from L'Inexistence Divine."

<sup>27</sup> Malabou, "Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain," 490–1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 491. "le matérialisme est sorti de l'état de nature [...] il n'est plus seulement concerné par le mouvement des atomes ou le problème de la nécessité physique mais bien aussi, tenant les deux dans un tissage serré, par celui de la nécessité politique et sociale."

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 491–2. "la question des lois de l'économie n'est évoquée par aucun des 'réalistes,' comme si n'étaient dignes d'intérêt que les seules lois physiques."

<sup>30</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*.

idealist neo-Jacobins who think politics plays out mostly on the side of the human will; for Malabou, economics is deployed as a human principle against the Speculative Realists' purported obsession with inanimate things. Yet both eventually betray economics through their joint turn to a subjective politics of the void. In Žižek this happens through his fondness for the subject's ability to retroactively posit its own conditions in radical freedom, rather than passing through a series of historical underpinnings: "every dialectical passage or reversal is a passage in which the new figure emerges *ex nihilo* and retroactively posits or creates its necessity."<sup>31</sup> Having effectively eliminated anything that might pre-exist the positings of a subject, Žižek no longer has much to differentiate him from the neo-Jacobin voluntarists in the political sphere: among other problems, no clear place remains for the economic reality on which he had insisted. As for Malabou, once she as well turns – we will see – to a radically potent political subject, economics can no longer be classed as a human force belonging on her side of the argument, but looks now like a recalcitrant force allied with the inanimate world that humans can never master. In other words, once one commits to a political subject that radically posits its decisions out of thin air, economics is left behind as a species of realism: after all, it would not be economics if we could arbitrarily decree our own economic environment rather than already finding ourselves in one.

In any case, if Malabou sees no room for economics in Speculative Realism, she is probably getting this sense mostly from Brassier and Meillassoux. For it is certainly true that for this pair of rationalists, the laws of nature are of interest primarily because they contain no human ingredient, since economic or historical laws could never have quite the same pristine status as those uncovered by physics. In a sense, both interpret the fight against correlationism too literally: as if economics were inherently "idealist" merely because it involves humans rather than inanimate things alone. Meillassoux thinks that realism shows its best face only twice: before humans existed, and after they are gone. For Brassier's part, he is famously contemptuous of the humanities and social sciences by contrast with the natural sciences. But my own position is more like Manuel DeLanda's, in which realism is attained not by getting rid of the humans in any situation, but by treating reality as an excess beyond human thought even in cases when humans are there on the scene.<sup>32</sup> For example, OOO has a realist conception of commodities without needing to contest Marx's argument that they are always socially produced: the point is that the reality of objects is never fully expressed in their commodity-form, just as electrons and quarks remain a real surplus deeper than any of their theoretical or experimental effects.<sup>33</sup>

But let's return to Malabou's point about nature and culture see where it leads. Contemporary materialism, she holds, has already reconceived contingency in its own manner, one that – unlike Meillassoux's doctrine – does not limit itself to nature alone. Like Marx with his dual awareness of the laws of nature and of society, the new sort of materialist contingency recognizes both of these two great spheres of reality. Malabou assigns the credit for this broader notion of contingency to Althusser, which in 1982 he termed a contingency of "encounter" (*rencontre*).<sup>34</sup> As Malabou puts it: "It is, in fact, this philosopheme of the encounter that enables, first, the articulation of nature and politics, and second, the emergence of a new question of the subject characterized as the remnant of this encounter."<sup>35</sup> From Meillassoux's standpoint this would no doubt sound like just another "correlation" of the natural and the political, but let's play along for now.

As Malabou sees it, the great virtue of Althusser's strange new materialism is that it "begins with nothing" (*commence par rien*).<sup>36</sup> We could actually say that it has three noteworthy aspects in particular: (1) it has no traffic with anything that determines thought, including any supposed anteriority of sense as

<sup>31</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 231.

<sup>32</sup> See the opening pages of DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*.

<sup>33</sup> For a first object-oriented approach to Marx, *Capital* see Harman, "Object-Oriented Ontology and Commodity Fetishism."

<sup>34</sup> See Althusser, "Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre."

<sup>35</sup> Malabou, "Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain," 492. "C'est en effet ce philosophème de la rencontre qui permet premièrement l'articulation de la nature et de la politique, et deuxièmement l'émergence d'une nouvelle question du sujet compris comme résidu de la rencontre."

<sup>36</sup> Althusser, "Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre," 561.



found in phenomenology, for instance; (2) it holds that things crystallize through their relations rather than beforehand; (3) it proclaims the absoluteness of contingency, not quite in Meillassoux's sense – since subjects are implicated here as well – but in the sense that all things take shape unpredictably and without teleological aim. The formation of a thing actualizes no prior possibility, but comes about for the first time through the encounter between distinct elements. In Malabou's words: "Althusser rejects the long dominant version of materialism according to which *everything is accomplished in advance*, the structure precedes its elements and reproduces them so as to reproduce the structure."<sup>37</sup> How far we have come from the structuralist position of Althusser's own prime!

There are two points worth noting here. The first is that this position closely resembles the one defended more than two decades later by Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, who is less a correlationist than an outright idealist, despite her hedging use of the term "agential realism."<sup>38</sup> For Barad as for Althusser – and who would have guessed at such a pairing? – "nature" and "thought" do not pre-exist one another; instead, each of these terms bootstraps the other into existence. In Barad's case this is inspired by her deep admiration for the quantum-theoretical speculations of Niels Bohr, while Althusser cites no scientific referent in particular. The second point concerns Bryant's suspicion toward all humanized forms of materialism, of which Althusser's position is clearly one. As Bryant memorably puts it in *Onto-Cartography*: "materialism has become a *terme d'art* which has little to do with anything material. Materialism has come to mean simply that something is historical, socially constructed, involves cultural practices, and is contingent [...] We wonder where the materialism in materialism is."<sup>39</sup> This raises a fairly obvious question: given that any materialism of the 1982 Althusser variety dispenses with nearly all of the properties traditionally ascribed to matter, including the attribute of pre-existing human thought about it, why call it materialism at all? Here I speculate that the word retains its appeal mostly due to the long critical and emancipatory legacy of "materialism" in Western history. But it is questionable whether this suffices to justify "materialism" as a name for a theory that recognizes nothing resembling what we usually think of as matter. This is why I prefer Malabou's franker statement of the doctrine: "Here, everything proceeds from 'an ontological and political void.' A void which is precisely the place of politics."<sup>40</sup>

Malabou's commitment to the void is clearly no jest, since it enables the entirety of her argument and motivates her preference in political allies. "The subject," she says, "is that which only appears when things begin to lack."<sup>41</sup> Although Malabou appreciates Brassier's sense of the proximity between reality and the void, she faults him for not deriving the subject itself from this same void. By recommending that we do so, she comes into close proximity with another great thinker of the Real as void, Jacques Lacan. As Malabou tells us:

The "dis-universe," that is to say the abyssal disappearance of things produced by their very being, is what liberates subjectivity that speaks. The subject is the result (and not the promise) of a stalling of the world [...] The subject of the correlation certainly thinks itself as a "before," an *a priori*, but this anteriority is only the shadow of this subject which always comes after, once the cliff of the real crumbles onto itself.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Malabou, "Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain," 493. "Althusser rejette la version du matérialisme, longtemps prédominante, selon laquelle 'tout et accompli d'avance, la structure précède ses éléments et les reproduit pour reproduire la structure.'" The portion cited from Althusser is taken from his article "Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la recontre," 574.

<sup>38</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

<sup>39</sup> Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Malabou, "Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain," 493. "Ici, tout précède d' 'une vide, ontologique et philosophique.' Un vide qui est précisément le lieu du politique."

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., "Le sujet est ce qui ne peut apparaître que là où les choses viennent manquer."

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 493–4. "Le 'désunivers,' c'est-à-dire la disparition abyssale des choses produite par leur être même, est ce qui libère la subjectivité parlante. Le sujet est le résultat (et non la prémisse) d'un décrochage du monde [...] Le sujet de la corrélation se pense certes comme un 'avant,' un *a priori*, mais cette antériorité n'est que l'ombre de ce sujet qui vient toujours après, lorsque la falaise du réel s'est effondrée sur elle-même."

Such materialism no longer pretends to address a material outer world independent of the subject. Instead, it proceeds in the Lacanian mode: refashioning the real as a trauma, and remodelling objects into projections of desire.

### 3 Politics of the void

If one were to accept this strange materialism without realism, what might be the political consequences? This question occupies the last three or four pages of Malabou's article, and the results are every bit as surprising as the ontology she proposes. For it turns out that Althusser rereads no less a figure than Jean-Jacques Rousseau in terms of the void. Malabou reports that for Althusser's Rousseau, "the subject takes form [...] only when things are lacking."<sup>43</sup> Even the social contract, that pivotal concept of Rousseau's career, is said to emerge *ex nihilo* through the sheer resolve of the community. Althusser demonstrates that "the birth of politics coincides with the desertification of the earth, provoked by the finger of God: in other words by nothing, with neither origin nor reason, which opens the possibility of the symbolic – that is to say, of the concept, of thought. Even the concept of the universal can only emerge from the dis-universe."<sup>44</sup> By apparent contrast with the Speculative Realists, Malabou asserts that "the real *is not only* the relation of things among themselves, of things in themselves, outside all subjective synthesis. The real *also* delivers, in withdrawing, this empty place where the subject takes form."<sup>45</sup> I have added italics to this sentence to indicate those places where Malabou understates her position considerably. It is not just that she thinks the void where the subject arises is "*also*" there "*along with*" relations between things themselves. Quite the contrary: the void alone is there, and she seems to leave no place for things themselves at all. Obviously, this is a rather radical position on the status of the world, one that we have also encountered in the works of Žižek, another ally rightly cited by Malabou in her article. What bothers me about this notion of reality as posited by a subject in the void is not its departure from common sense, but its heavy debt to a Lacanian dismissal of autonomous entities that has never struck me as sufficiently motivated.<sup>46</sup> For while it is understandable that a psychoanalyst would wish to focus on things as they appear to the human subject, Lacan goes considerably beyond a psychoanalytic stance, upholding and inspiring "materialisms" that require the effective vaporization of any world beyond the subject. And as utterly daring as this may seem, it is too dependent both on Kant's assumption that all relations are thought-world relations, and on Hegel's collapse of thought and world alike into an immanent plane where nothing is inaccessible for long.

But let's ask more concretely what sort of politics might emerge from such a void. It should go without saying that in his 1982 article, "Althusser engages materialism in a direction that is no longer Marxist."<sup>47</sup> Indeed. What could Marx possibly do with a materialism where both nature and economics are generated *ex nihilo* through an "encounter" between two terms that did not even pre-exist their meeting? Here Malabou turns to another of the allies enlisted in her article, Jacques Rancière. In Rancière's own words, a community "is borne by no historic necessity, and bears none in turn."<sup>48</sup> This is what he calls a community on the edge of an "anarchic void." Malabou completes the thought on her own: "For my part, I call anarchist (and not simply anarchic) the contingent withdrawal of the real from which the subject emerges.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 494; "le sujet ne prend forme, en effet, que là où les choses manquent."

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., "la naissance de la politique coïncidait avec la désertification de la terre, provoquée par le doigt de Dieu, autrement dit par rien, sans origine ni raison, qui ouvre la possibilité du symbolique: c'est-à-dire du sens, du concept, de la pensée. Aussi le concept d'universel ne peut-il émerger que du désunivers."

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 495, emphasis added; "le réel n'est pas seulement le rapport des choses entre elles, des choses en elles-mêmes, hors de toute synthèse subjective. Le réel délivre aussi, en se retirant, cette place vide où le sujet prend forme." Emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> See especially Lacan, *The Object Relation*.

<sup>47</sup> Malabou, "Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain," 495.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., "n'est portée par aucune nécessité historique et n'en porte aucune."

Materialism becomes anarchist when it *no longer has any more need of a 'prince,' that is to say of an arche*, in order to think its originary contingency."<sup>49</sup>

In closing, Malabou reflects on the possible political failings of both her allies and opponents. Althusser's materialism is not enough, since he remains committed to the notion of a "prince," a dominant subject.<sup>50</sup> As for the Speculative Realists, she has this to say:

Contemporary "realism" was not born at just any moment, and ought not to be satisfied with the political neutrality that it has systematically adopted to this day. It is important to note that it appeared at the same time as a planetary awareness manifested in increasingly visible fashion, by the awakening of collective initiative, autonomous experimentation, and the appearance of a new social coherence everywhere in the world. Realism is inscribed in the anarchist turn of contemporary materialism.<sup>51</sup>

This could be read in several different ways, and it is not clear that any of them strike the mark. For in one sense, it is not really true that the Speculative Realists have remained politically neutral while obsessing over the things themselves as studied by science. In my 2010 interview with Meillassoux, for instance, he commented as follows: "I am very hostile to neo-liberalism, which has turned the contemporary world (and the work world in particular) into a nightmare of rare intensity, one with which the politics of [Nicolas] Sarkozy is utterly impregnated." He goes on to describe this type of capitalism as a "moral and intellectual madness, which the crisis of 2008 was apparently insufficient to bring down."<sup>52</sup> Brassier's political comments have been somewhat more sparse, arising mostly in the context of denouncing Bruno Latour as a "neo-liberal" while making faint calls in his own voice for "revolution."<sup>53</sup> One could perhaps lodge the complaint that Speculative Realists fiddle with pure ontology as the world burns around them, but Malabou herself is also more thinker than activist, and thus it is unlikely that this is her point.

What she does seem to mean is that Speculative Realism has a political problem due to its effort to account for independent reality at all. The view developed in her article is that it is only in the anarchic void that the freedom of the human subject truly emerges. More than this, she implies that a great planetary awakening is underway, one characterized by spontaneous collective invention rather than any slavish limitation in the face of a non-existent "reality in itself." It is also noteworthy that she praises "the awakening of collective initiative, autonomous experimentation, and the appearance of a new social coherence," but says nothing about the most glaring political problem of our time: the ongoing collapse of the climate. As if to drive this point home, Malabou's final page offers further maxims in a human-centered spirit. For instance: "[t]here is no real without a subject,"<sup>54</sup> a phrase that haunts her unconvincing efforts later on the page to seem even-handed. For nowhere does Malabou say, equivalently, that there is no real without an object. And this is where OOO may pose a stronger challenge to Malabou's politics than do the other brands of Speculative Realism. In *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political*, I made the case that there are two and only two central problems with modern political theory, and both are still present at the heart of Malabou's theory.<sup>55</sup> The first is an obsession with what humans are like in the state of nature: with the Right of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Schmitt convinced that humans are dangerous animals who ultimately respond only to force, and the Rousseau-Marx Left defending the opposite view that humans are

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 496. "Pour ma part, j'appelle anarchiste, et non simplement anarchique, le retrait contingent du réel d'où émerge le sujet. Le matérialisme devient anarchiste lorsqu'il n'a plus besoin de 'prince,' c'est-à-dire d'archè, pour penser sa contingence originaire."

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 497. "Le 'réalisme' contemporain n'est pas né à n'importe quel moment et ne doit donc pas se satisfaire de la neutralité politique qu'il a systématiquement affichée jusqu'à ce jour. Il est important de voir qu'il est apparu en même temps qu'une prise de conscience planétaire qui se manifeste de façon de plus en plus visible par l'éveil de l'initiative collective, l'expérimentation autonome et l'apparition de nouvelles cohérences sociales partout dans le monde. Le réalisme s'inscrit dans le tournant anarchiste du matérialisme contemporain."

<sup>52</sup> Meillassoux, "Interview with Quentin Meillassoux (August 2010);" in Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 173.

<sup>53</sup> Brassier, "Concepts and Objects," 53.

<sup>54</sup> Malabou, "Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain," 497. "Il n'y a pas de réel sans sujet."

<sup>55</sup> Harman, *Bruno Latour*.



naturally good but corrupted by society and its competitive systems.<sup>56</sup> We can escape this endless Right/Left deadlock simply by noting that human nature is partly beside the point: the political world is massively stabilized by non-human entities that encourage and restrict action and thought in different ways. When Latour accompanies the primatologist Shirley Strum in her observation of baboons, they make careful note of this role of inanimate objects.<sup>57</sup> In no way are these objects generated in “encounter” with a speaking subject. Although in some sense Malabou shares Latour’s interest in the interface where humans meet non-humans, she seems to imagine that this encounter is generated as if *ex nihilo*, which hardly does justice to the material and political constraint posed by things. It seems far less plausible to treat today’s political awakening – if indeed there is one – as a voluntaristic resolve in the face of the void, and more likely that such an awakening would be incited by the breakdown of an especially important non-human thing: the climate itself. What launched today’s youthful “anti-extinction” movement was surely not a purely subjective inner drama. Instead, it was the realization that the subject is now threatened by some very non-subjective things: carbon dioxide, methane, micro-plastics. To respond to the revenge of Gaia by calling for anarchic liberation of the subject from pre-existent reality seems like a dubious strategy. Lacan was a thinker of many gifts, but he is one of the last people I would phone for advice on global warming, and the same holds for Althusser.

The second political lesson to be drawn from Latour follows closely from the first. That is to say, modern political theory likes to imagine there is something called political *knowledge*: whether it be knowledge of human nature, or of the best way to organize societies if only people were not so stupid (the Right) or not so greedy (the Left). One of the little-noticed strengths of Latour’s position is his awareness that the political truth never really becomes visible. What we have in its place is experimentation leading to brief consensus and provisional ostracism of those forces with which we currently cannot accept.<sup>58</sup> This need for a makeshift assembly of political solutions would make little sense if the only political actor were a human subject hovering in a void. It is – or should be – a commonplace that political life is defined largely by constraints: economic, geographical, demographic, and historical. While a case can certainly be made for not accepting our current interpretation of these factors as ironclad destiny, it seems a strange position to hold that nothing holds us back but our own failures of imagination.

## 4 Two points in conclusion

Before leaving the reader in peace, I would like to add one final remark about Malabou, and another about the current predicament of radical political theories more generally. We have seen that Malabou seems rather warm to the notion of a pure politics of the subject, one compatible with certain ideas of the 1982 Althusser, Lacan, Rancière, and the 2012 Žižek (as partly opposed to the 2005 version). Whatever constraints the political subject might face in principle, they count for little by contrast with the *ex nihilo* positings of anarchic heroes. What makes this so strange, coming from Malabou, is that it was she who did so much to free us from the dualism in philosophy of mind between rigid physical determinism on one side and a de-physicalized *cogito* on the other. With her notion of plasticity, Malabou put forth a more sophisticated model in which the brain can be shaped decisively by training, but only within limits. Unlike most continental thinkers, in their vague background disdain for the hard sciences, Malabou was willing to take brain injuries seriously, and to speak of the lasting effects of emotional trauma on the human psyche. Here was a theoretical space where significant interaction between brains and cultures was not just made possible, but was required by the very terms of her theory. Why, then, does Malabou not offer us a comparable theory of political plasticity? This would be a theory in which economic, geographical, demographic, and historical constraints were not easily outstripped by anarchic dreams, but one in which such

<sup>56</sup> Harman, “Realism Without Hobbes and Schmitt.”

<sup>57</sup> Strum and Latour, “Redefining the Social Link.”

<sup>58</sup> Latour, *Politics of Nature*.

constraints might be molded or reformed within certain limits while still respecting their force and legitimacy. But that would require a willingness to push back on the default political stance of continental theory at the moment, which takes pretty much any event as grounds for the utterly orgasmic overthrow of all that has existed heretofore. Humans do not exist in a void because humans are not “subjects” in the neo-Jacobin sense, but just unusually complex and fascinating objects, existing in a political space with other such objects. This is why Latour’s attempt to model politics after ecology seems like a better start than the claim that subjects make “anarchic” (why not “monarchic”?) decrees in the midst of a cosmic vacuum.<sup>59</sup>

This brings us back to what is actually the central issue brushed against by this article: the consequences of deciding which kinds of relations are politically primary. It is perfectly clear that for Malabou, the only relation worth asking about politically is the one where subject meets world. This is true not only of Malabou and of the recent allies she enlists, but of modern political theory as a whole. There is a defined human political sphere, and outside the walls there lies nature, the enemy, or Death, master us of all. Earlier I mentioned the “onto-taxonomical” character of modern philosophy, referring to its assumption that there are two and only two basic kinds of entities: (1) the human subject and (2) everything else. The political theory offered by Malabou in “The Political Void” is clearly onto-taxonomical in this way. All that matters is settling the relative strength of the human side and the non-human side – to say that “the subject is not the same as the human” would merely muddy the waters – and categorizing the various ways in which they meet. We might also decide whether the subject is good or evil by nature and calibrate our actions accordingly, which is precisely what the Right and Left have been doing for centuries. The problem with making all politics orbit a single human/non-human relation is that it grants the subject a full fifty percent of every situation. Co-owners of every relation in the cosmos, we humans feel free to dissolve whatever we find, since we own half of everything in sight: and perhaps own everything, if we really are floating in a void and positing all the rest *ex nihilo*, or determining it as the retroactive effect of a “count.”<sup>60</sup>

The reason the future of politics is ecological, rather than revolutionary or anarchic, is that the point where human meets world is not the only point where politics appears, or even the primary one. Nor do we find such a primary point at the site where humans meet capital. Consider the dependence of humans on the relations between swamps and methane, sulfur dioxide and ozone, or bees, herbicides, and cellular telephone towers. Here we are not always the masters: still less are we princes, and it took a great deal of nerve for the 1982 Althusser to assert that he was dethroning all princes at the very moment of making the subject the prince of politics.

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<sup>59</sup> Latour, *Facing Gaia*.

<sup>60</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*.

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