

book review

**Chip Power**

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Jane Bennett

*Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*

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There is a section in *Vibrant Matter* where Jane Bennett describes the process of eating potato chips. This process isn't about human will, or the evil antics of fast food corporations, or historical changes in cultures of eating; it's about entering into an assemblage where chips provoke or call forth the manual labour of eating. It's not that these other social or economic factors are irrelevant to this assemblage but to reduce chip eating to them is to be blind to the material force and vitality of food. It is to represent chips as an externalised resource for the expression of human culture and to strip them of any independence or active power. In the thinking of Jane Bennett, potato chips matter because of their vital capacities and the question that drives this book is in what ways might these capacities become political? Or, to put it differently, potato chips are a serious topic of political philosophy.

I don't have any problem with this proposition but there are plenty in the humanities who do. In the last six months I've been to several papers where I've

witnessed a distinct backlash against new approaches to thinking about materiality. This takes many forms from accusations of naturalism or theologism, to claims that a focus on objects or the nonhuman is basically just naïve realism—and we all know how unsophisticated that is! Often these reactions seem to represent more than rigorous scholarly scepticism; they are too charged for that. The displays of irritation, the dismissive attacks, the demand that matter be contained by ‘social construction’ reveal a deep anxiety about the stuff of the world getting too much attention. Human sovereignty runs deep.

Bennett’s project is to challenge these humanist assumptions via an examination of the material force and vitality of matter and the implications of this for political theory and process. If matter is vibrant, or intrinsically lively and energetic, how does it participate in political processes? What happens to concepts of agency, intentionality, interests and publics if we acknowledge the *force* of things; a force that is not simply mechanistic but is, instead, the ability of all things (natural, technological, synthetic) ‘to exceed their status as objects and manifest traces of independence and aliveness, constituting an outside of experience’. (xvi) These are singularly important questions not simply because the call of the outside is an insistent challenge to human centeredness but because political thinking urgently needs to expand its notion of collectives and interests if it is to make any kind of difference to the contemporary condition. In this way, then, *Vibrant Matter* can be situated as part of an emergent field loosely termed political ecology or ‘political matter’, to use Braun and Whatmore’s recent term.<sup>1</sup> This field has to be carefully distinguished from the ecohumanities. While it shares a concern with the nonhuman forces of the world and our complex and shifting interconnections with these, analyses of the *political* nature of these interconnections are at the forefront of Bennett’s approach. In seeking to stage a conversation between the metaphysics of vital materialism and poststructuralist political philosophy, Bennett avoids the ahistorical mysticism and ecological romanticism (or despair) that can plague some ecohumanities work. What we have here is a rigorously argued investigation of the ways in which material things spark matters of concern and come to participate in political events.

The driving analytical question of this book is: *how* do materials become political? By this Bennett does not mean how does matter become the passive or

troubling object of political processes, the focus of conflicts, disputes or whatever. Rather, how does matter become involved in political processes as an actant? How can we understand material things as having what DeLanda might call political 'expressivity' or the capacity to affect actions and calculations in certain arrangements? These are difficult questions. They challenge how we understand politics and political processes by refusing to see it as an exclusively human activity. And they challenge how we think about materiality by acknowledging that stuff: things/environments/material processes might actually have a constitutive role in shaping political life.

In pursuing these issues Bennett uses a variety of knowledge practices. Her most accomplished is the careful and rigorous development of an alternative mode of political thinking—a mode that puts matter at the centre of the story; that continually returns to a focus on the things of the world and the questions they pose to us. This is not a book of critique or denunciation. As Bennett argues, to critique or demystify is to implicitly privilege the human as the source of proper knowledge or truth and to inhibit the possibility of imagining and generating new alliances with matter. Whether you support the arguments of this book or not, the intellectual sensibility that it embodies is refreshing and exemplary. You can *feel* Bennett's thinking because she is attuned to the relationality of knowledge, relations that extend in multiple directions: to the reader; to the matter to be thought with; to the ideas and arguments of others that have gone before, to an imagined better world. The liveliness and generosity of the ideas, the sense in which Bennett is completely in control of her argument, the ways in which the more than human world is respected, are all evidence of a thinker who is fully engaged with urgent political issues. Under Bennett's careful and creative thinking issues as diverse as contemporary Western diets, worms and the power grid are examined in all their philosophical and political complexity.

Bennett's materialist thinkers range across Deleuze on assemblages, Bergson and Driesch on vitalism, Darwin on anthropomorphising, Latour on actants and agency, Dewey on publics, and much more. These thinkers are used to develop an account of politics that has an ecological imperative. By this Bennett means a focus on the ways in which publics are called into being and generate complex webs of relationships and 'conjoint actions' (100); and the ways in which these publics come

to share an affective response to a particular issue or problem. Publics are prompted by events or propositions that attract a swarming body of participants who are affected whether they like it or not. In this way, then, publics are not about fixed 'stakeholders' or those who volunteer for membership, they are about the strange alliances and collectives that emerge around a common concern or event.

Consider an issue like the Brisbane floods that I recently lived through. What kinds of collectives or publics formed around this event and how did the flood participate in these? Isabelle Stengers offers great insight into these questions. Like Bennett she insists on a fully materialised account of politics:

Political ecology affirms that there is no knowledge that is both relevant and detached. It is not an objective definition of a virus or a flood that we need, a detached definition everybody should accept, but the active participation of all those whose practice is engaged in multiple modes with the virus or the river. As for the cosmopolitical perspective its question is twofold. How to design the political scene in a way that actively protects it from the fiction that 'humans of good will decide in the name of general interest'? How to turn the virus or the river into a cause for thinking? But also how to design it in such a way that collective thinking has to proceed 'in the presence of' those who would otherwise be likely to be disqualified as having idiotically nothing to propose, hindering the emergent 'common account'?<sup>2</sup>

In Stengers account of political process the flood and the virus make their material presence felt in different ways, in different assemblages. They have multiple ontologies. This means that matter does not have fixed or essentialist effects, it is materially diverse and vital so that different aspects of the flood or the virus are *made present* according to the associations or publics they become caught up in. In this way, then, the mattering of material stuff becomes connected to relations, to networks of interaction in which matter is not inert or recalcitrant but a participant. For example: I lived the January flood as brown water steadily rising towards my front door, as frantic packing up, as conversations with neighbours I had never spoken to before, as a constant pressure to think 'like water' and wonder how it might move through my house. The hydrologist lived it as cubic metres, modelling software, advice to government and pressure on dam walls; these are different

material realities of the same flood, the flood is multiple and it is present in this event demanding to be heard and included in the common account.

In political ecology it is impossible to keep humans at the centre of the story. Matter constantly forces thought or poses questions. As Bennett argues, it is both animate and animates us. Matter is an active force, the world pushes back, it asserts and inserts itself into human affairs so we need a method of political analysis and representation that recognises the ways in which nonhumans might become active parties in the making of social collectivities and political associations.<sup>3</sup>

This raises complex issues about *how* matter participates in political process and how it is given voice. As Latour has argued, all political speech is mediated, it does not emerge as the spontaneous or authentic expression of popular human will (much as we may cling to this idea as the heart of democracy) or as respected political authority. Everyone is a spokesperson, everyone *re*-presents. All relationships between representatives and their constituents are staged; there are no unmediated forms of this relationship. The political challenge is to develop mechanisms that consult with all parties and allow for multiple mechanisms of representation. Collective thinking has to proceed in ways that reflect on who talks of what, who represents, how might we become spokespersons for the nonhuman and find ways to let it into the story? For Bennett 'collective' means an *ecology* of human and nonhuman elements that come together, or gather around an issue, and negotiate the various propositions that emerge from all those that are affected. And so the flood speaks through modelling software, local memory, helicopter views, waves lapping at the doors of office buildings and more.

Another key element in Bennett's approach to political process is an account of agency and causation that is cut loose from a traditional humanist orbit. Her term 'thing-power' developed in chapter one, 'The Force of Things', and chapter two, 'The Agency of Assemblages', is wonderfully compelling and astute. It refers to the distributed agency that emerges in assemblages, big and small. This agency is emergent and a product of the forces that are unleashed when all sorts of things in an assemblage become associated or form alliances. If agency is the differentially distributed capacity to make a difference in the world, the challenge is to understand how the capacity of matter, in certain arrangements, prompts changes and makes a difference—good or bad. While this account of the agency of

assemblages flattens things out and invites a focus on relations rather than structures, it never presumes an equality between all actants. As Bennett argues ‘the political goal of a vital materialism is not the perfect equality of all actants, but a polity with more channels of communication between members’. (104)

There is plenty more to say about this book, my account here does not do justice to many of its other arguments and theoretical interventions but let me finish by reiterating its remarkable achievements. What Jane Bennett has delivered is the most precise and compelling account of a more than human politics and why it matters. *Vibrant Matter* offers the best argument to date of how materiality operates as vital force, as much more than social construction or brute resistance or recalcitrance. In respecting the stuff of the world, in being attentive to it, Bennett has pushed political philosophy way beyond its comfort zone: something that was long overdue and from which there is no return.

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<sup>1</sup> B. Braun and S. Whatmore (eds), *Political Matter*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> I. Stengers, ‘The Cosmopolitical Proposal’ in B. Latour and P. Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public—Atmospheres of Democracy*, ZKM and MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2005, p. 1002.

<sup>3</sup> Braun and Whatmore, p. xiii.