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# Six Steps towards an Object-oriented Social Theory (O.O.S.T)

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## Abstract

*In the approach that sustains this entire essay, besides my own trajectory as a researcher, the path moves away from the orthodox tradition, the more Kantian one, incorporating in Social Theory a philosophical line for a long time forgotten, by including figures such as Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), the founding father, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), Henri Bergson (1859-1941), Gilbert Simondon (1924-1989), Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and many others. They would be the famous authors of vitalism, also known as philosophers of life (Lebensphilosophie), philosophers of process, or philosophers of affect. What are the implications when these figures invade the field of Social Theory, which characteristics can be found and, mainly, which advantages when compared with their more orthodox side and their insistent commitment to Kantian philosophy and its transcendental by-products (power, culture, ideology, discourse, etc)? Following this and other questions, six points will be considered as representative of what we call here an Object-Oriented Social Theory (O.O.S.T.).*

**Keywords:** *object-oriented social theory; ontology; Bruno Latour; Graham Harman*

## I. Introduction

**W**e believe in a world that is sustained by people, by individual initiatives, in a liberal stance, by collective movements, in a Marxist approach, or by structures of *Power* and *Language*, in a more post-structural turn. In any case, *human* is always the criterion, the cause of causes, the reason for sufferings, crises, or even changes

and revolutions. Whether in individual or in structural terms, whether in phenomenological or functionalist interpretations, whether using a pragmatic or positivist criterion, the human is always there, always in the corner, behind the scenes, protecting us from the encounter with the most frightening word in Social Theory: *Contingency*.<sup>1</sup>

In this Kantian scenario, animals and objects enter only as supporting actors, as an effect, or even as a lifeless goo, waiting for humans to imprint meaning or to dissolve themselves phenomenologically throughout the four corners of the world. They are often seen as mere *tabula rasas*, anthropomorphic supports, never carrying a meaning of their own. A bird, or a simple object, as well as nature in general, is nothing more than a blank sheet of paper, at least this is how Rousseau's enlightenment works when he turns his eyes to the terrain of things. Vanity prevents us from thinking Social Theory beyond the limits of the *transcendental man*, as Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904) well recalled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>2</sup> or even Nietzsche.<sup>3</sup> It is obvious that we do not want to compare ourselves with animals or objects, since they have a lot of *Body* (*corps sans organes*), a lot of matter, a lot of contingencies, especially when we analyze the western tradition and its contempt for the *res extensa*.

In the approach that sustains this article, i.e an Object-Oriented Social Theory, the path moves a little away from the orthodox tradition, the more Kantian one, incorporating into Social Theory a philosophical tradition for a long time forgotten, involving figures such as Spinoza (the founding father), Nietzsche, Whitehead, Bergson, Simondon, Deleuze and many others, at least when we think about our main panels and publications here in Brazil. They would be the authors of *vitalism*, also known as *philosophers of life*, *philosophers of process*, or *philosophers of affect*. While my involvement with the Social Sciences course grew, I noticed a kind of continuity among contemporary authors such as Bruno Latour (1947-2022), Timothy Ingold (1948-), Jane Bennett (1957-), Donna Haraway (1944-), Brian Massumi (1956-), Karen Barad (1956-), Annemarie Mol (1958-), Manuel DeLanda (1951-), Doreen Massey (1944-), and many others, which pointed towards a new epistemological scenario. According to my own analysis, Object-Oriented Social Theory (O.O.S.T.) basically is the instant when philosophical vitalism meets social theorists along the way, forcing

<sup>1</sup> The underline is mine.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *Monodology and Sociology*, trans. Theo Lorenc (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2012), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Richard Polt (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 32.

language to go down unexpected, often strange, yet full of possible paths. According to Levi Bryant, “there is, in this culture, a speculative tendency, deserving the title of ‘Spinozism,’”<sup>4</sup> a kind of alternative matrix behind the scenes of Social Theory. In other words, there is a “Spinozist lesson”<sup>5</sup> that must be learned, a vitalist commitment that needs to be made, which leads us straight into a new journey toward a new speculative field, a kind of “materialist speculation,” as Quentin Meillassoux (1967-) would say.<sup>6</sup>

In *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory* (2016), written by Graham Harman (1968-), we found for the first time the term *Object-Oriented Social Theory* (O.O.S.T). Although its title refers to ‘Social Theory,’ it loosely connects with this field of inquiry, restricting itself only to occasional thinkers (such as Bruno Latour, Manuel DeLanda, and Marshall McLuhan), omitting any reference to classical debates (agency versus structure, institutions, power, public sphere, domination, etc.) The aim of this article is to extend this Harmanian project in three ways: 1) by bringing the debate itself into the field of Social Theory and all its classical and contemporary contours, 2) by including all Object-Oriented approaches, not just OOO,<sup>7</sup> and 3) by introducing Spinoza, and his new *post-humanist episteme*, as the founding father of an Object-Oriented Social Theory. In other words, O.O.S.T, as it is discussed here, has much broader contours than those imagined by Harman himself.

It is noteworthy to mention that this expression has never been developed in detail by Harman, excluding some references in few articles. In this sense, it would be interesting to expand its boundaries, looking at the implications of Object-Oriented Social Theory, as well as its possible outlines. There are, in fact, many defining characteristics of the O.O.S.T. that have been inherited from the vitalist lineage (post-humanism, flat ontology, irreducionism, ontologism, difference principle, aestheticism, anti-hileformism, etc.). Some of these features have been selected here, being nothing more than a small tasting of a menu that is not only deep, but constantly growing, as can be seen in the contemporary debates that still take place in classes, lectures, conferences, and books.

<sup>4</sup> Levi R. Bryant, *Democracy of Objects* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 248.

<sup>5</sup> Brian Massumi, *What the Animals Can Teach Us About Politics?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 51.

<sup>7</sup> Other Object-Oriented Approaches include “New Materialism,” “Ontological Turn,” “Actor Network Theory,” and so on.

## II. The decentering of the human and the arrival of objects

Before diving into dense and metaphysical waters, true oceans that intimidate the bravest of humans, a curious question sprouts on the horizon: how to suggest an immanent, slippery, decentered language, how to put into practice all that *nature of Spinoza*, all that Nietzschean *becoming*, all that Deleuzian *body without organ*, i.e., how to work with something that cannot be represented, that is not exactly a content, a predicate, but a process, a movement? Social Theory, in this alternative ground, lies on a simple idea, the Greek tragic subject, one who understands language as a material and even didactic flow, carrying nothing abstract, not even any signifier. In this new alternative model, the greatest teaching is given by example, by the way experience is lived and language sustained. The level of openness that exists in this new trend is not a theme dissolved in the body of the text, but the text itself, its arrangements, its paths, deviations and contours. The vitalist universe, in this sense, is not a simple dip in analytical waters, as interesting as they may be, but a way of life. It is a change of attitude on the part of the researcher himself, a kind of trace that is observed not only in the content of what is said and done, but in the very form of this *saying* and *doing*. It is not so much something of the epistemological order, a journey of premises, thesis, and propositions, but a journey towards an ontology, at least in a Heideggerian sense where predicates are not welcome. What is lived replaces what is represented, and the practice of this scientist, instead of losing its focus, dispersed in an opening of possibilities, begins little by little to gain power, to fill itself with life, spreading through all spaces, invading every available domain. In other words, we realize that

There is a tendency to decentralize the human, describing the impact of the non-human in the form of technology and other non-human agencies on collectives involving human beings and how these agencies cannot be reduced to human intentions, signs, meanings, norms, signifiers, discourses, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike the previous models, O.O.S.T does not replace one transcendentalism with another, one correlationism (*corrélationalisme*) with another, as if it would only exchange one axis of meaning with a more interesting one, in a kind of *epistemic cynicism*. This means that “there

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<sup>8</sup> Bryant, 248.

is no longer a transcendental term,”<sup>9</sup> no *a priori* support of meaning. Therefore the goal is not the replacement of the human with something nobler, however seductive that may seem. His unprecedented proposal arises from this break with the Kantian model, with its *Copernicanism*. Thus it enters into an alternative epistemological regime, towards a new space of interactions. In this new radical decentered model, there is no criterion that from the beginning determines the configuration of reality, nothing that suffocates it, nothing that takes away its vital energy, not even if it is the Transcendental Man. The rhizome (network) is flexible enough to hold several modalities of ‘being,’ multiple ontologies, from a sensitive world, in which the body is an important axis, to flows of pure materiality, inorganic universes, or even a tiny virus that suddenly appears. In the end, there is, in this scenario, a kind of opening to several horizons of meaning, several modes of existence, thus replacing the mania of transcendentalists for reducing the richness of encounters to a certain epistemic horizon, to a single reference of signification, what Graham Harman<sup>10</sup> called *Overmining*.

The phrase by Deleuze “everything I have written is vitalist, at least I hope it is”<sup>11</sup> is not a loose comment by a French philosopher, but a persistent characteristic, a sample of a very old and deep philosophical tradition, although it has long been forgotten behind the scenes in Social Theory. The orthodox and Kantian tradition, here also called *transcendentalist* or *correlationalist*, for a long time was more attractive in the eyes of the curious sociologist, since transcendentalism is functional, pragmatic, in offering clear contours to what happens, as well as defining the very identity of that same thinker. Not only is its *transcendentalism* convenient, but also often rigid, centralizing, and dangerous, as it is clear in the next section:

The formation of European sociological traditions was also mostly not exempt from the Kantian legacy, often reappropriating Kant’s insights through neo-Kantian conceptions that transposed the transcendental conditions of the known subject to quasi-transcendental or historical, social, cultural, and economic conditions.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Michael A. Greco, and Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 13.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Savransky, “A Decolonial Imagination: Sociology, Anthropology and the Politics of Reality,” *Sociology* 51, no. 1 (2017): 6.

Although so attractive and pragmatic, beyond its importance in classes, texts, even in this article, transcendentalism often claims a monopoly on meaning, while silences many voices along the way. The costs of this Social Theory are high, by revealing not only a dangerous pretension, on the border of vanity itself, but also an inefficiency in the face of contemporary (and hybrid) issues: social networks, the 2020-2022 pandemic, new identity movements, ecological crises, and many others.

It must be clear here that there is no boundary between *transcendentalism* (and its Kantian background) and an Object-Oriented Social Theory, as if it were a simple choice between two options, since transcendental structures are not only necessary, but also inevitable. Those transcendentals ensure the integration of both my own ego and the surrounding world itself, providing firmness, consistency, and completeness. Even this article would be completely impossible without an underlying axis of meaning, without a *transcendental horizon* (transzendentaler Horizont) to organize the flow of its words. Unlike several philosophical approaches, such as Meillassoux's, I do not believe that the major goal of our endeavor should be the complete "relinquishment of transcendentalism."<sup>13</sup> A Social Theorist, by having a slightly more empirical commitment, cannot turn his back on the importance of this matrix within conversations, conflicts, justifications, gossip, theories, etc. The real problem presented here is when this *transcendentalism* goes over the edge, when it starts to suffocate other instances of meaning,<sup>14</sup> be they human or non-human. This means that transcendental structures, with a kind of underlying Kantianism, are problematic only when they enact a certain kind of ontological monopoly, instead of guaranteeing the passage to other alternatives, possibilities, and encounters. The proposal of O.O.S.T. and of this article, therefore, boils down to a simple Latourian question: "what happens when we abandon this burden, this passion, this indignation, this obsession, this flame, this fury, this dazzling goal, this excess, this insane desire to reduce everything?"<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Malabou, "Can We Relinquish the Transcendental?" *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (2014): 243.

<sup>14</sup> Although it is not the purpose of this essay, it should be noted that there are political criticisms about Neo-Kantian model, as well as its transcendentalist unfoldings. One of these criticisms can be found in: *Around The Day in Eighty Worlds: Politics os Pluriverse* (Durham, and London: Duke University Press, 2021) written by the British sociologist Martin Savransky. In this work, he establishes a close link between colonial practices of violence (exclusion) and Neo-Kantian models of thought.

<sup>15</sup> Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan, and John Law (Cambridge,

### III. The main characteristics of vitalism

Undoubtedly, it is possible to observe traces of vitalism in figures like Max Weber (1864-1920)<sup>16</sup> and George Simmel (1858-1918),<sup>17</sup> but only scattered traces still mixed with a classical version of Social Theory, with its evident Kantian characteristics.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, what happens today, with emphasis on the figure of Bruno Latour, is a full return of *vitalism*, with all its decentered language structure, and not just scattered traces.

Since the introduction has been made, with its trajectories about to be traveled in depth, here I follow some defining characteristics of vitalism as a philosophical movement, at least some of its main marks. All of them also cross the repertoire of the O.O.S.T. theorists, presenting major ruptures with what existed until then. Every single feature described below justifies the new ontological opening in Social Theory for something far beyond the human, beyond its transcendental boundaries, including cars, tables, cats, roads, algorithms, ghosts, fictional characters, etc:

a. *Posthumanism*: This first characteristic is special and distinct from all the others, since it is not only a criterion, a theory, let alone an object of investigation. *Posthumanism* is a new *episteme*, a new field of possibilities, in which theories, objects, and techniques can sprout from the ground. This means that even approaches so different from each other, such as *OOO*, *process philosophy*, *new materialism*, and many others, share the same epistemological structure, the same common ground of possibilities. In classical Social Theory it is very common to believe that “human motives sharpen all our questions, human satisfactions are hidden in all our

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MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 157.

<sup>16</sup> Gabriel Cohn presents an interesting reading of the influence of Nietzschean thought on Weber. Moreover, Weberian passages such as: “becoming itself is indifferent to meaning” is a clear evidence of that connection. Julien Freund, *The Sociology of Max Weber*, trans. Mary Ilford (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), 43.

<sup>17</sup> Simmel at the end of his career, mainly thanks to his close contact with the Nietzschean universe, also incorporated parts of vitalism within his own project of Social Theory, without the degree of radicalism that can be found in authors such as Latour, Ingold, Massumi and many others. Gilles Deleuze himself dedicates a small part of his book *What is Philosophy?* to Simmel and his Nietzschean antecedence: “Simmel is one of the rare thinkers to have probed the enclaves or margins of a society, which often seem to be unstable: the stranger, the exile, the migrant, the nomad.” Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 104.

<sup>18</sup> Thiago de Araujo Pinho, *Decentering Language: Deleuze, Latour and the Third Copernican Revolution in Social Sciences* (Feira de Santana: Zart, 2018), 12.



answers, all our formulae have a human trace.”<sup>19</sup> Even in the aesthetic field it is believed that “art [is] the way in which the human reactions to the world are articulated and fixed aesthetically.”<sup>20</sup> The human is presented here as an inevitable *transcendental*,<sup>21</sup> the *transcendental man*. He is always considered as the condition of possibility of thought, as well as the condition of existence of the world itself (in the Merleau-Pontynian sense). In O.O.S.T. the *human* is still present, no doubt, since it is an important detail on the frame of life, but now in a decentered or “de-transcendentalized.” As a result of a kind of vitalist turn, it is possible to observe what it is called *posthumanism*, a type of critique of the centrality of the human and its correlative aspect. Graham Harman has rightly reminded us, recalling Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern*, that the classical model presents an ontology divided into two parts (50% reserved for humans and 50% reserved for everything else). The human was given the privilege not only of having an ontology all his own, which is already an enormous achievement, but also a much greater privilege: to define the other ontological spaces by reference to his own criteria.

That kind of humanistic vanity can be found everywhere. Even in religions like Christianity, humanistic traits appear all the time. The human is not just presented as if he were some creature, a simple organism produced by divine hands, but something special, much more noble. Unlike animals, Adam was created in the image and likeness of God (*Genesis* 1:27), carrying a bit of the divine within himself, while producing an insurmountable ontological difference:

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that moveth upon the earth.<sup>22</sup>

The animals, created on Day Five, resemble man in that they were also formed from the ground (*Genesis* 2:19) and have the breath of life

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<sup>19</sup> William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Lisbon: National Press, 1907), 109-110.

<sup>20</sup> Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critics and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: The Universal Library, 1970), 19.

<sup>21</sup> It must be noted that there are vitalist versions of pragmatism and of William James himself, as presented by Martin Savransky, Shaviro, and Stengers. In these unorthodox versions, James could arguably fall under the O.O.S.T.

<sup>22</sup> *Genesis*, 1:26.

(*Genesis* 1:30, 6:17, 7:15, 7:22; *Ecclesiastes* 3:19). But although the animals resemble man in certain aspects, man surpasses them because God breathed directly into man and because He made man in His own image. Moreover, this improvised divine, this piece of heavenly matter, was produced on the sixth day, crowning creation, just as it was given the privilege of naming everything its eyes were capable of seeing, especially the animals it encountered along the way.

Although humanism is a persistent matrix of interpretation since the beginning of Christianity, we can also see that in Social Theory. With O.O.S.T., on the contrary, the human became decentered, at the same time that its ontological vanity is broken in the name of another cosmic process. Indeed, perhaps not only has the human been decentered, having lost its Kantian centrality, but it is also possible that “we were never human.”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the central point is not the loss of centrality, but its non-existence altogether. We were never as amazing as and as central as we believed.

b. *Realism*:<sup>24</sup> Instead of discussing the conditions of possibility (or existence) of the world, as neo-Kantians like to do, vitalist authors bet on the world as such, that is, on the hypothesis of its existence independent of humans or any kind of implied subjectivity. This means that we are here far beyond all imaginable neo-Kantian by-products, all their favorite transcendentals, such as *Power*, *Language*, *Culture*, *Ideology* (*Ideologiebegriff*), as well as the very concept of *Experience*. In other words, the very “phenomenological transcendental reduction,”<sup>25</sup> known as *epoché*,<sup>26</sup> and also the condition of existence of a subject dissolved in everything that exists, is not welcomed by the vitalist authors. Even this phenomenological pact, where subject (human) and object are dissolved and fused, is something constantly broken by the excessive and overflowing presence of a world that surpasses ourselves. This realism defended by authors like Deleuze, “does not present a flow of the lived immanent to a subject,”<sup>27</sup> but an autonomous dimension,

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<sup>23</sup> Donna Jeanne Haraway, “When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?” *Theory, Culture and Society* 23, nos. 7-8 (2006): 136.

<sup>24</sup> I am aware that there is a “Marxist conception of realism” in Georg Lukács, *Essays*, 31, as well as a phenomenological version of realism, although I use the term only for those authors who go fully beyond Kant and his implications. That is, this concept is used here within the contours of an Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO).

<sup>25</sup> Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2000), 51.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Gilles Deleuze, and Claire Parnet. *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, and Barbara

its own rhythm. In this sense, phenomenology, for vitalism, is an idealist philosophical tradition. This means that to speak of ontology (reality) is almost impossible at the borders of a phenomenological project, no matter how much it presents itself with a declared commitment to “go to the things themselves.”<sup>28</sup> If we intend to talk about ontology, or even a multiplicity of ontologies, the *Husserlian epoché*, also known as the basic method of any phenomenologist,<sup>29</sup> turns out to be a major obstacle that must be circumvented. If “[t]he real are gradients of resistance,”<sup>30</sup> this resistance is also directed to any attempt at transcendentalism, especially that phenomenological one and its transcendental reduction. By fusing subject (human) and object,<sup>31</sup> as if they were synonyms, while calling this undifferentiated realm “Ontology,” the phenomenological project monopolizes the possibilities of meaning, making it impossible to imagine a world without an implicated, dissolved subject (human). For this reason, the ‘world’ for phenomenology “is the absolute setting for ourselves and for all the things we experience.”<sup>32</sup> This means that not only structures and systems distort reality, with their epistemic and internalized products, but also practice itself at its most spontaneous and pre-reflective core. Despite what is offered in courses, classes, and books, neither of these alternatives has any kind of ontological advantage, since they both follow the same transcendentalist path, merely reinforcing a classical tradition that always walked the halls of Social Theory.

There are, no doubt, ways to “de-Kantianize phenomenology,” as well as other Neo-kantian approaches, by incorporating its premises within the boundaries of O.O.S.T. realism, as is quite evident in the concept of *sensual object* in Harman, of *belief* and *desire* in Tarde, or of *prehension* in Whitehead. The strategy is simple: we need to decenter the transcendentalist terminology, such as *experience*, *power*, *system*, *intentionality*, *body*, and all their implications, expanding beyond the boundaries of a philosophy of the subject that reserves to the human an indispensable role, implicit in every detail, in every bond. As Whitehead

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Habberjam (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1995), 22.

<sup>28</sup> Tom Sparrow, *The End of Phenomenology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Morten Axel Pedersen. “Anthropological Epochés: Phenomenology and the Ontological Turn,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 50, no. 1 (2020): 13.

<sup>30</sup> Latour, *The Pasteurization*, 166.

<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty states: “[...] in perception we witness the miracle of a totality that surpasses what one thinks to be its conditions or its parts [...].” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (London: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 8.

<sup>32</sup> Sokolowski, 54.

would say, this means that maybe fire has “the power to melt gold,”<sup>33</sup> maybe “a molecule has a historical trajectory,”<sup>34</sup> or even “a stone feels the heat of the sun.”<sup>35</sup> Transcendentalism is bolstered by an insistent humanistic background structure, which prevents us from observing things beyond our cherished monopoly. Once removed, we can think of new possibilities within Social Theory itself, as well as interesting dialogues that can be made in it.

For example, coronavirus, which crossed the years 2020-2022 with unforgettable force, as a realistic element, surpasses our strategies of control and justification, not being just a result of some transcendental, such as Power, Language, Experience, Culture, Ideology, etc. Moreover, objects in O.O.S.T. have an unprecedented agency, not only decentering the role of the human, but also making it optional.<sup>36</sup> In other words, we are talking here about a world “[...] that needs no phenomenological subject, no human agent and no cultural set, to already be there (where?), doing the work of feeling.”<sup>37</sup>

c. *Anti-correlationism*: According to vitalist authors, not only Power, Language, Culture, Ideology and Experience do not have a monopoly on meaning, but no transcendentalist remnants should remain on the horizon. Subject (human) and world cannot be thought of as a single instance, as if they were correlated. This means that it is possible (and necessary) to talk about the world as an autonomous space, with its own rhythm and that does not necessarily cooperate with the human universe and its practical or theoretical transcendentalists. According to Meillassoux, the creator of the term *correlationism*, the correlationist attitude denies any realist horizon or its ontological commitment. In one of his classic texts, he states:

I call “correlationism” the contemporary opponent of any realism. Correlationism takes many contemporary forms, but particularly those of transcendental philosophy, the varieties of phenomenology, and postmodernism.

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Halewood, *A. N. Whitehead and Social Theory: Tracing a Culture of Thought* (London: Anthem Press, 2011), 33.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>36</sup> “For a long time it has been agreed that the relation between a text and [a subject] is always a matter of interpretation. Why not accept that this is also true between so-called texts and so-called objects, and even between objects themselves?” Bruno Latour, “On Inter-Objectivity,” *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 3, no. 4 (1996): 166.

<sup>37</sup> Savransky, *A Decolonial Imagination*, 11.

But while these currents are all extraordinarily varied in themselves, they all share, in my opinion, a more or less explicit decision: that there are no objects, no events, no laws, no beings that are not always correlated with a point of view, with a subjective access.<sup>38</sup>

The O.O.S.T. position, on the other hand, is “to advocate a realist ontology that refuses to treat objects as constructs or mere correlates of mind, subject, culture or language.”<sup>39</sup>

This “mundanity of the world”<sup>40</sup> is precisely what confers its autonomy, including, of course, its moments of frustration, rupture, and overflow, as the classic example of Heidegger and his famous broken hammer. It is necessary, for this reason, to avoid both the transcendentalism of the structuralists, and their introjected categories, as well as the transcendentalism of the phenomenological subject, constantly implicated in everything that exists. “For both Harman and Meillassoux, the ‘great externality’ of the world beyond correlation can therefore only consist of subjectless objects.”<sup>41</sup> This means an escape from various Neo-kantian derivatives, as well as from the classical intersubjectivity of authors like Alfred Schütz (1899-1959), Peter L. Berger (1929-2017), Erving Goffman (1922-1982) and Harold Garfinkel (1917-2011), towards a new (and eccentric) field of experimentation: *the interobjectivity*.<sup>42</sup> This means that the two classical approaches in Social Theory (structuralism and phenomenology), even if they appear as opposites, are part of the same philosophical tradition, of the same Copernican revolution, here called *correlationist (transcendentalist)*. As a consequence, the combination of the two lines of thought, offered by the authors of synthesis, such as Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), Anthony Giddens (1938-), and Jürgen Habermas (1929-), is not far from the Neo-Kantian fate of the other authors. Despite the attempts, and the merit involved in each of them, we remain stuck in German waters, in an eternal “*correlationist circle*” (*cercle corrélationnel*).<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London, and New York: Continuum, 2008), 1.

<sup>39</sup> Bryant, 26.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: University of New York Press, 2010), 44.

<sup>41</sup> Shavero, 50.

<sup>42</sup> Latour, “On Inter-Objectivity,” 240.

<sup>43</sup> Meillassoux, 1.

d. *Flat Ontology*: Everything here remains on the same level of ontological horizontality, which implies a certain suspicion of concepts such as structure, system, society,<sup>44</sup> that is, the refusal of anything that stands out from the vital flow, establishing levels, hierarchies and *a prioris*. We are talking here, therefore, of “a multiplicity and not a structure or system.”<sup>45</sup> According to this characteristic, there is nothing above or below reality, much less a beyond, a hereafter, or even a background. The only real thing is the movement itself, its ability to infect everything around it, no matter what. If systems and structures appear on the horizon, which they undoubtedly can, they become a simple assemblage (*agencement*), nothing more than always *a posteriori* and provisional products, rather than a paranoid and timeless matrix behind the scenes of everything that is done and said. In this model, there would be no ontological privilege directed toward the human and its derivatives, which greatly reconfigures our way of understanding social life and its dilemmas.

For Whitehead, unlike Heidegger, the coupling of the human world has no higher status than the duels between comets and planets, or between dust and moonlight. All relations are exactly on equal *footing*.<sup>46</sup>

In this model, there would be no privilege for the humans, or their transcendental categories, such as *Structure, System, Language, Power*, and many others, which greatly reconfigures our parameters of evaluation. This means that “social worlds remain flat at all points.”<sup>47</sup> By saying that all elements are “at the same footing,” Latour proposes a single ontological level which does not imply an ontic equality. Differences exist, no doubt, as in the distinctions between nature and culture, but these differences are not profound enough to install an ontological abyss, that is, two completely separate, irreducible and hierarchical worlds. On this ground of a flat ontology, “the stone is now conceived as a society

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<sup>44</sup> According to Latour, “arguments form a system or structure only if we forget to test them.” Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 18.

<sup>46</sup> Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 46.

<sup>47</sup> Latour, “On-Interobjectivity,” 240.

[...]”<sup>48</sup> or even “the atom is only explicable as a society.”<sup>49</sup> The implications of this reasoning are very interesting, as well as unprecedented, at least in the frontiers of Contemporary Social Theory, involving new ways of understanding the contours of science and its network of articulations. As a result of this flat ontology, it is impossible to define the relevance of an event right from the start, since they are part of the same undifferentiated plane. To understand if something is relevant, therefore, it is necessary to follow the path of experience, of its controversies,<sup>50</sup> observing its contrasts and contours, never establishing *a priori*s or any kind of transcendentalist background matrix.

In Whiteheadian terms, there is a need for a critique of what was called “bifurcation of nature,” that is, “a world divided into two realms that distribute and organize causes and effects, subjects and objects, facts and values, nature and culture, appearance and the really real, and so on.”<sup>51</sup> The 2020 pandemic, which also crossed the years 2021 and 2022, for example, jeopardized precisely this bifurcation, this belief that the human universe presents its own rules, superior and displaced from everything else. The Coronavirus has invaded our ontological purism, creating, perhaps, what Freud would probably call a “fourth narcissistic wound in our humanistic body.” The world with all its relevancies and irrelevancies, in O.O.S.T., is not an extension of some human expectation, even when that humans present themselves in a phenomenological, discrete, implicit way. “Whitehead goes so far as to say that concern is a ‘final factor’ of the world. It is not a content of human subjectivity.”<sup>52</sup>

e. *Difference*: In vitalism “we habitually observe by the method of difference.”<sup>53</sup> This differential principle, well developed in Deleuzian philosophy, is nothing more than the certainty that things “are not,” that is, they do not carry a fixed identity that drags itself along time (substance),<sup>54</sup> but are defined only by the link they establish with other things, in a circuit of exchanges and relations. There is, therefore,

<sup>48</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 78.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>51</sup> Martin Savransky, *The Adventure of Relevance: An Ethics of Social Inquiry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 213.

<sup>52</sup> Massumi, *What the Animals Teach us About Politics?* 198.

<sup>53</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Graham Harman, with his Aristotelian perspective, is the only exception to this rule since he still embraces the notion of substance as an important concept.



“this rejection of the philosophy of identity.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, within OOO (Object-Oriented Ontology), its authors “welcome this difference, remaining open to the possibility of surprise, refusing to reduce strange strangers<sup>56</sup> to simple fixed entities.”<sup>57</sup>

The principle of difference is not as unusual as it might seem at first sight, especially to those who know a little Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), and his general linguistics, although the principle of difference in vitalism is something ontological, and not the result of a semiotic abstraction called *signifier*.<sup>58</sup> In the attempt to understand what society is, for example, the goal is not the search for something stable, permanent, and detached from the flux of encounters, as in Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) and his sociology of transcendence, but the other way around. “There is no essentialism in this list, since each entity is defined only by its relations.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, there is nothing beyond the links established, no kind of hidden metaphysical treasure. Instead of an essence, we have an excess, a kind of surplus produced by experiences in themselves, in their spontaneous and decentered flow. The authors of O.O.S.T., therefore, “[...] are those who hold that the thing is not an autonomous reality apart from its interactions with other things, but is constituted by these interactions.”<sup>60</sup> This means that the identity of beings is either a fiction within a process of constant becoming,<sup>61</sup> or an extremely costly step that demands much energy and *perseverance*,<sup>62</sup> or even

<sup>55</sup> Bruno Latour, “Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social,” in *The Social in Question. New Bearing in History and the Social Sciences*, ed. Patrick Joyce, 1-125 (London: Routledge, 2002), 125.

<sup>56</sup> “Strange stranger” is the equivalent of the body without organs in Levi-Bryant’s Onticology, that is, an excess within the encounters themselves, a realist trait that goes beyond the convenient limits of the transcendental.

<sup>57</sup> Bryant, 268.

<sup>58</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (Columbia: Columbia University Press. 2011.), 118.

<sup>59</sup> Graham Harman, “Whitehead and Schools X, Y, and Z,” in *The Lure of Whitehead*, eds. Nicholas Gaskill, and Adam Nocek, 231-248 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 234.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 234.

<sup>61</sup> Gilbert Simondon, *The Genesis of the Individual*, trans. Mark Cohen, and Sanford Kwinter (London: Zone Books, 1992).

<sup>62</sup> As Latour would say: “If identities exist among actors, it is because they have been constructed at great cost.” Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 162. Following the same reasoning, Latour continues: “In Whitehead’s vocabulary, Pasteur’s laboratory appears to us as an occasion offered to trajectories of entities inheriting previous circumstances, deciding to persevere in a new way of being.” Bruno Latour, “Do Objects Have History? A Meeting



[...] identity is only the minimal degree of difference and hence a kind of difference, and an infinitely rare kind, as rest is only a special case of movement, and the circle only a particular variety of ellipse.<sup>63</sup>

According to a common kind of intuition, deep in the world of life, things retain their identities despite their encounters with the world, what Aristotle called *ousia* (substance). As this great Greek philosopher would say, it doesn't matter whether Socrates is sad or happy, since in the end he remains what he is. In other words, "Aristotelian primary substance is always durable."<sup>64</sup> Following a similar path, it is common to think of the Coronavirus, for example, also as an identity wandering around, a kind of substance that is independent from the bonds it establishes around it, nothing more than a piece of matter waiting to be discovered by some scientist. Despite Harman's attempts to convert Whitehead into an Aristotelian disciple,

The simple notion of an enduring substance that holds persistent qualities, whether essentially or accidentally, expresses a useful summary for many purposes in life. But whenever we try to use it as a fundamental statement of the nature of things, it turns out to be wrong. It arose from a mistake and has never been successful in any of its applications.<sup>65</sup>

f. *Aesthetics*: Before diving headlong into this sixth characteristic, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the term. *Aesthetics* here can be thought of not only as a synonym for art, but also as equivalent to *Body*, sensibility and affections, an approach that can be found in Nietzsche and in all the authors of O.O.S.T. especially in Brian Massumi and his reformulation of the Spinoza's project. This means that *Aesthetics* is also synonymous with a *Theory of Affect*. According to this feature, everything is governed by the same vital principle, a single movement, which results in a curious detail: *everything has*

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between Pasteur and Whitehead in a Lactic-Acid Bath," *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos* 2, no. 1 (1995): 83.

<sup>63</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *Monodology and Sociology*, trans Theo Lorenc (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2012), 40.

<sup>64</sup> Harman, "Whitehead and Schools X, Y and Z," 237.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

agency, no matter what. Every inch of reality carries an impulse, an energy, whether human or not. We are talking about everything that “disposes its body to be able to be affected in many ways, or that makes it capable of affecting external bodies in many ways.”<sup>66</sup> Everything overflows with meaning, involving a rich, though dispersed, field of relations and exchanges. In other words, everything has “the capacity to affect and be affected.”<sup>67</sup> Of course, different authors name this vital and aesthetic flow in different ways (*Act Potency*, *Conatus*, *Becoming*, *Elan*, *Imitation*, *Individuation*, *Thing-Power*, etc.), although they all share this same vitalist detail.

In more methodological terms, involving here the very internal process of any given research, Aesthetics in a sense replaces an exaggerated epistemic commitment (true or false) by placing emphasis on the way things are experienced, woven, and affected, what Latour called *relevance*<sup>68</sup> and Whitehead called *importance*.<sup>69</sup> This means that a scientific statement is not only true or false as an element describing a certain state of affairs, but also, and primarily, relevant or irrelevant. Besides the “matters of fact,” and its exaggerated *epistemologism*, we have the Latourian “matters of concern,”<sup>70</sup> which does not exclude epistemic commitment, but only expands it. The aesthetic dimension in the methodological field rescues at the same time a resumption of the sphere of meaning, and its importance in a research, although without falling into the social constructivism of the post-structuralists, since they always reproduce a hilemorphic model.

No matter whether using methodological or ontological terms, aesthetics is one of the fundamental cores of an Object-Oriented Social Theory. “Everywhere there is unity of circumstance there is, therefore, an aesthetic relation established [...]”<sup>71</sup> The world, in this approach, is a decentered field of forces, in which various elements, living or not, collaborate and compete with each other. As a consequence, the concept of *life* is no longer a simple property of

<sup>66</sup> Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. James Guttman (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1954), 184.

<sup>67</sup> Massumi, 198.

<sup>68</sup> Bruno Latour, “Do Objects Have History?” 7-26.

<sup>69</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Free Press, 1968).

<sup>70</sup> Bruno Latour, “How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies,” *Body and Society* 10, nos. 2-3 (2004): 205-229.

<sup>71</sup> Alfred North Whitehead. *Science and Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), 34.

an entity, an organism, but a movement of reality as a whole. In this sense, even a stone could be alive, since it participates in the same flow of affections, as anthropologist Tim Ingold would say.<sup>72</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

If it were possible to put together all six elements that define vitalism, and consequently O.O.S.T., it would certainly be the idea of an alternative (or decentered) language. Object-Oriented Social Theory (O.O.S.T.) has produced not only this differentiated epistemological field, but has also opened a gap to a new universe of possibilities, involving new approaches, from more modest ones like the Ontological Turn within anthropology, or even more radical versions like the *new materialism*. In any case, we are here facing a creative space of questionings, criteria and approaches, a new universe just waiting to be explored by the hands of some curious person. Following this reasoning, we can raise a final question: “What paths can O.O.S.T. open, what are its implications?” This article was just an introduction, nothing more than a sample of a tradition of thought that not only grows every day, but also invades several disciplinary and professional fields.

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<sup>72</sup> Timothy Ingold, “Materials against Materiality,” *Archaeological Dialogues* 14, no. 1 (2007): 1-16.

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