

## “New” Realism as a Problem of Method

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### Abstract

The development of the discussion on “Speculative Realism” and “Speculative Materialism” is very well documented. However, in order to better understand the overall project of this “New Realism” it is helpful to draw light to the genealogy and context in which the problem evolved in. In this paper, I map out a genealogy of the complex problem of “New Realism” in order to understand what it is that is “new” about this realism. The central argument of the paper is that the new problem of realism is in essence a question of method, resulting from a tension between philosophical and sociological epistemology.

**Keywords:** Speculative Realism, Philosophy of Science, Sociology of Science, Methodology, Postmodernity

### 1.

The problem of realism does not seem to be a single specific problem, but rather a general label for a problematic context, which may encompass the problem of the reality of ideas, the reality of a mind-independent world, or the problem of the role of form and content in experience. At its core, the problem of realism is an indicator for a situation in which the foundations of our working knowledge or methodology have become problematic. In that sense, the problem of realism is to be understood as a process in which the hypotheses of a scientific paradigm, which determines what is to be regarded “as fact” or “as real”, have come to be reevaluated. Therefore, the problem of realism is also a reevaluation and reflection of

the historical circumstances under which the problem takes shape, although it is not to be identified with it. Moreover, it is to be understood as an appearance of an anomaly within the process of knowledge and is bound to the logic of scientific practice. In the following section it is therefore necessary to remind ourselves of the specificity of the scientific structure in modernity.

It is true that reality has ceased to be a principle. According to such a principle, the reality of the real was posed as a divisible abstract quantity, whereas the real was divided up into qualified unities, into distinct qualitative forms. But now the real is a product that envelops the distances within intensive quantities. The indivisible is enveloped, and signifies that what envelops it does not divide without changing its nature or form. The schizo has no principles: he is something only by being something else. (Deleuze and Guattari 2000, 87)

According to the analysis of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, modernity can be conceived as a history of the loss of a single principle of reality that could serve to structure and encode knowledge and the social. According to their criticism of intellectualism, everything is pragmatically interconnected a priori, and every attempt to code the pragmatic field lacks understanding of the fundamental pragmatic assemblages. This analysis, however, does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that we live in a "postmodern" society, in an age of the "agonny of the real", in which all criteria for distinguishing the real from the surreal or unreal are lost. Cultural theorists like Baudrillard, who proclaim a postmodern age of "simulation" and free-floating "simulacra" (Baudrillard 1988, 166-184), seem to overrate the fact of the loss of a principal concept of reality, that is, a single perspective which can fully determine "the real". In contrast, the loss of reality as a principle means that we can no longer determine "the real" by reducing it to a philosophical, a theological or a physical principle. The ways in which knowledge is produced are irreducible, since a methodological and disciplinary diversification has been characteristic of the development of the sciences over the last (at least) 200 years.

Accordingly, every argument against the differentiation and the diversification of scientific disciplines and practices

seems implausible and conservative, since this process can only lead to a differentiation and diversification of experience, of perspectives of knowledge. However, with an increase of specialization comes an increase in conflicts in the communication of results and in the attempts to organize these. Every attempt to structure, simplify or hierarchically organize disciplines, each attempt to control and limit their proliferation or dissemination, seems to be an extrinsic measure which will eventually fail due to a lack of adequate insight or an elevated point of view from which such a structuring would be legitimate. Organization from the “outside” is based on a misunderstanding of the practices of science and even of the diversification of society “underlying” science. In that sense, disciplines are interrelated in their unfolding and evolution as a process of “seriation”, as Panofsky puts it:

Whether we deal with historical or natural phenomena, the individual observation of phenomena assumes the character of a “fact” only when it can be related to other, analogous observations in such a way that the whole series “makes sense.” This “sense” is, therefore, fully capable of being applied, as a control, to the interpretation of a new individual observation within the same range of phenomena. If, however, this new individual observation definitely refuses to be interpreted according to the “sense” of the series, and if an error proves to be impossible, the “sense” of the series will have to be reformulated to include the new individual observation. (Panofsky 1955, 35)

It is noteworthy that Panofsky underlines that (scientific) observation is always correlated to contexts or horizons in which the observation makes sense. There is, however, no identity of the observation and its context, but indeed a fundamental difference: an observation can render its context false. Here one is not only strongly reminded of Husserl’s concept of the horizon of perception but also of Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions and its claim that observations can force a “series” (of knowledge) toward a shift or revolution of its scientific paradigm (where the paradigm can be understood as the context of the observation). This can only be the case if the observations have an intensive quality to themselves, which is precisely the difference of observation and context. But that difference seems to be relative and not absolute, just as the scientific series seem to be relative and not absolutely

separated. Therefore, the idea of the incommensurability of the scientific series cannot be upheld. Moreover, the paradigm as a series has to be understood as part of a differentiating process, a process of diversification. This process would not take place if there were no resonance, no commensurability of the series of knowledge.

Another notable implication of both Deleuze/Guattari's and Panofsky's analysis is that the traditional division of natural and historical phenomena cannot be sustained as a prescriptive determination as in classical metaphysics. The identity of the difference within the complexity of the observation and of the process of seriation seems to be the immanent, propulsive or dynamic factor of knowledge: a process that has no outside, but which is neither reducible to a principle. Derrida's statement that there is no "outside" (Derrida 1967, 227) of the text or Lyotard's correlation between the process of knowledge and the struggle of power (Lyotard 1984, 31-47) represent "illegal" steps outside the process of knowledge, since both positions assume an exterior position from which one can rightfully judge what the principle of reality is and what it is not. Statements of this kind tend to specific aspects of reality as the global context of a multiplicity of observations, which is not only imprecise, but also holistic. The problem with statements of this kind is that they presuppose a strong metaphysical concept of possibility (text, power), from which they derive a processual logic resulting in a impossibility of interdisciplinary communication (e.g. Derrida's complete and systematic disregard of the natural sciences and empiricism, Derrida 1981, 64) and an inability to relate to observational knowledge (e.g. Derrida's somewhat awkward attempt to comment on the "problems of the world" in *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida 1993, 227-236). In other words, positions which uphold too strong a principle or too narrow a concept of reality must either reach the conclusion of a general impossibility of cognition or of a concept of reality as mere negativity. It is in this sense that we can understand Demmerling's assertion that theorists of incommensurability must be understood as "disappointed realists" (Demmerling 2004, 47).

Today, instead of offering a prescriptive account of what it is to be real, an analysis of reality thus has to correspond to these structural developments of science and knowledge. From whichever field of philosophy (hermeneutics, phenomenology or (linguistic) pragmatism) an analysis of realism is conducted, one has to analyze the context where knowledge is produced. Consequently, the role of the philosopher is not that of a regulator defining what is real beyond the process of the sciences. In this sense, it was Francois Laruelle, whose works on non-philosophy and generic epistemology suggested a new use of philosophy and the sciences aiming at the equitable configuration of the sciences (Mullarkey and Smith 2012, 1-18).

If one defines philosophy as a practice embedded in the immanent process of the sciences and knowledge, classical ambitions of reason and of the project of modernity seem to be put into perspective if not overcome. Here discussions like the debate between Habermas and Lyotard provide a good example of the struggles to uphold or reinterpret the classical ambitions and the role of philosophy in relation to the grand metaphysical narratives. However, neither Habermas' conservative support of the narratives of the Enlightenment nor Lyotard's defeatist position towards the language games of postmodern society seem to satisfactorily redefine the role and method of philosophy. This, I want to argue, is due to the fact that both positions put too much focus on the idealistic-communicative aspect of science. Therefore we are faced with a methodological problem one could call "administrative realism" or "methodological idealism": even if both positions do not proclaim an absolute idealism, they uphold a strict methodological transcendentalism in their focus on language as the primordial condition of the possibility of knowledge.

## 2.

After having sketched out the broader horizon in which the problem of "new" realism appears, I will now argue, that "new" realism does not originate in the philosophical discipline and is thus to be distinguished from inner-philosophical debates on realism. In the following I would like to suggest that

the problem of “new” realism emerges from a tension between two series of knowledge which are intricately related with each other: philosophy and sociology or – more specifically – the sociology of knowledge.

First of all, it has to be said that the sociology of knowledge can be understood as a continuation and extrapolation of the problems of classical epistemology. However, one cannot speak of a linear continuation in this case, since the classical problems of epistemology are extracted and transposed from the discipline of philosophy into the discipline of sociology. With this subtraction and transposition one is not only faced with a shift in method, but with a shift in the fundamental assumptions, presuppositions and expectations towards the nature of the answers within a specific field of research. The sociology of science, which has to be seen as a specialization of the sociology of knowledge, assumes that knowledge is a function of the social, that there is a fundamental sociality of knowledge which in one way or another forms and structures knowledge itself. Knoblauch identifies three main categories and questions of the sociology of knowledge (Knoblauch 2005, 17f.): 1.) How and to what extent is knowledge social? 2.) Is this sociality constitutive or determinant of knowledge? 3.) To what extent is social knowledge a belief or a cognition? Although these questions seem to represent the fundamental direction of the sociology of knowledge adequately, it does not seem plausible that the first question would ever be answered negatively in sociology. If the sociality of knowledge were to be denied, we would be confronted with an approach to epistemology that could be identified as philosophical or related to the cognitive sciences. In this sense, the sociology of knowledge implies the criticism that other approaches misunderstand or only partially understand the foundations of knowledge. This has an historical reason.

Although the roots of the sociology of science extend back to the works of Bacon, Vico and other Enlightenment authors, its disciplinary foundation and “research design” can be found in Scheler’s work and especially his book *Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft*, published in 1926. Although founding

sociologists like Simmel claimed that knowledge and experience are no longer comprehensible with reference to a transcendental subjectivity as in (Kantian) metaphysics (Simmel 1968, 2f.), it was Scheler who systematically brought together epistemology and ontology to form a sociology of knowledge with the ambition to become a global anthropology. In the preface to the first edition of the above-mentioned book, Scheler argues that this fusion is due to the “guiding conviction, which is a matter of principle”<sup>1</sup> that “epistemological research is doomed to be empty and fruitless without the simultaneous analysis of the socio-historical developments of the highest forms of human knowledge and understanding”<sup>2</sup> (Scheler 1960, 9) Scheler hence suggests that without knowing the culturally and socially prevalent schemes in which knowledge operates one cannot understand individual acts of cognition and understanding. In this sense, Scheler’s “research design” is guided by an axiom that redefines the relation between knowledge and society (Scheler 1960, 52-56)<sup>3</sup>.

It is interesting that Scheler proposes to define the relation of the individual subject and the group not as empirical but as “a priori”. As a result, the self appears as an empirical function of the group to which it is genetically bound and by which it is prestructured. The criterion of differentiation is defined as the empirical situation in which the subject is realized in its specificity. So these axioms clearly mark the transcendental direction of the sociology of knowledge, a direction which conceives the transcendental epistemology as intertwined with the logic of social history. This transcendental direction was later developed in the works of Schütz, Berger and Luckmann, and in concepts closely related to phenomenology such as Nancy’s concept of “being-with”. To cut a long story short, Scheler’s design of a sociology of knowledge represents the beginning of a specific transition of philosophical epistemology into sociological epistemology and its transcendental focus. And however plausible and fruitful this research design may seem to be, it opens up new problems for philosophy, which become clear only in the radicalization of Scheler’s axioms and principles in the constructivist movement

of the sociology of science (i.e. Bloor) and poststructuralist positions (i.e. Lyotard).

A shift in the sociology of knowledge which is perhaps the most consistent continuation of the phenomenological concept of the "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*) combined with the methodological and sociological transcendentalism is to be found in Berger's and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*. Combined with influences of symbolic interactionism and philosophical anthropology, the authors describe the social constitution of knowledge, underlining the importance of language as a constitutive dynamic of semantic fields and of the symbolic universe of the social world (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 8). In contrast to Scheler, Berger and Luckmann understand the socialization of the subject not as a primordial given but as a dialectic process:

In other words, to be in society is to participate in its dialectic. The individual, however, is not born a member of society. He is born with a predisposition towards sociality, and he becomes a member of society. In the life of every individual, therefore, there is a temporal sequence, in the course of which he is inducted into participation in the societal dialectic. The beginning point of this process is internalization: [...]. (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 149)

The subject is not primordially social but becomes social through symbolic interaction and habitualization – a process in which objective reality is internalized and merged with subjective reality. Here Berger and Luckmann are strongly influenced by the Marxist claim that "man's consciousness is determined by his social being." (quoted in: Berger and Luckmann 1991, 17). Despite the significance of this phrase, it is crucial that Berger and Luckmann try to avoid a misinterpretation of Marxism as "economical determinism" (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 18). They thus put the study of ideology into perspective by means of the phenomenological concept of intentionality:

Consciousness is always intentional; it always intends or is directed towards objects. We can never apprehend some putative substratum of consciousness as such, only consciousness of something or other. This is so regardless of whether the object of consciousness is experienced as belonging to an external physical world or apprehended as an element of an inward subjective reality (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 34).

In this sense, the sociology of knowledge has to be concerned with the social construction of reality. It is less the economic “substructure” than the intentional “substructure” of objective culture, knowledge and ideology that one needs to pay attention to. The main principle resulting from this interpretation of Marxism is a new, non-materialist concept of reality: already on the first page of their book, Berger and Luckmann suggest that reality must be defined as the quality of phenomena leading to the principal assumption that there is no material constitution of the knowledge of things. (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 13). Rather, the quality of things is constructed in symbolic interaction, substructured by intentionality. In this sense, we are confronted with an intellectualist approach to the sociology of knowledge, which is – because of its focus on symbolic interactionism – very much compatible with Wittgenstein’s late linguistic pragmatism.

### 3.

It is thus no wonder that Bloor constructs his *Strong Programme in the Sociology of Knowledge* as a position of social constructivism on the basis of Wittgenstein’s linguistic pragmatism. While Berger and Luckmann focused on the construction of everyday knowledge as the working knowledge residing in the field of research that phenomenologists such as Scheler, Husserl, and Heidegger discovered and explored, Bloor focuses on scientific knowledge:

All knowledge, whether it be in the empirical sciences or even in mathematics, should be treated, through and through, as material for investigation. Such limitations as do exist for the sociologist consist in handing over material to allied sciences like psychology or in depending on the researches of specialists in other disciplines. There are no limitations which lie in the absolute or transcendent character of scientific knowledge itself, or in the special nature of rationality, validity, truth or objectivity. It might be expected that the natural tendency of a discipline such as the sociology of knowledge would be to expand and generalize itself: moving from studies of primitive cosmologies to that of our own culture. This is precisely the step that sociologists have been reluctant to take. Again, the sociology of knowledge might well have pressed more strongly into the area currently occupied by philosophers, who have been allowed to take

upon themselves the task of defining the nature of knowledge. (Bloor 2002, 438)

Here it becomes clear that Bloor is very much aware of the structural differentiation and diversification of modern sciences. In this very political and polemic statement, Bloor argues for the development of a "strong programme of the sociology of knowledge" which not only investigates the social aspects of knowledge, but moreover understands itself as an inquiry into and definition of the "nature of knowledge" itself, challenging the field of philosophy. Taking up the transcendentalist and the constructivist approach of older positions in the sociology of knowledge, Bloor's strong argument consists in the externalist definition of knowledge and even of scientific knowledge. So instead of defining knowledge by its own intrinsic qualities, he entirely correlates knowledge to external social factors and processes. Consequently, Berger's and Luckmann's thesis that the qualities of objects in everyday life are socially constructed or formed is radicalized into the thesis that even the quality of the objects of scientific knowledge is socially constructed. With this strong externalist thesis of social constructivism there comes the idea that the knowledge of reality (as the quality of things altogether) is socially constructed. In order to understand the social constitution of reality (in the sciences), Bloor bases his research on Wittgenstein's linguistic pragmatism (Bloor 1992, 266-282), which in essence resulted from a renunciation of the theory of correspondence and the derivation of the term "language games" from a mathematical formalism. Yet Bloor says that mathematics and logic are the "most difficult of all the obstacles to the sociology of knowledge" (Bloor 2002, 443f.), indicating the linguistic sublation or abolishment of the essence of mathematics and so the linguistic holism of his research design. All factors combined, Bloor's strong programme faces the problem of relativism. If knowledge is altogether socially constructed, how is it that the sociologist can have a standpoint which allows for any kind of analytic criticism? It seems that if knowledge is entirely correlated to external factors like the socio-historical contingency, every possibility of justifying

scientific, political, or other discursive standpoints or theses is completely annihilated.

However, Bloor's perspective was not left uncriticized. It was Latour who not only challenged the constructivist paradigm in the sociology of science but also prepared the way for a reintroduction of the problematic into the philosophical debate by putting it into the perspective of the history of philosophy of modernity. I would like to suggest to divide Latour's criticism into two major aspects. Firstly, a perspective internal to the sociology of science and of knowledge and the debate of "constructivists vs. postconstructivists", as Kneer puts it (Kneer 2010, 314-341); and secondly, a global perspective on modernity or a cultural theory: a theory that understands the problem of constructivism as lying at the very heart of modernity and modern philosophy, hence reintroducing and expanding the problem to other disciplines.

The debate internal to the sociology of science and knowledge is concerned with the assessment of constructivism. Circling around the four tenets of the strong program in the sociology of knowledge (Bloor 2002, 442) the question is whether social constructivism is fundamentally a theory of intuitional social constitutionalism or a theory of radical or fundamental constructivism. Simply put, it is the question whether social constructivism also takes into account "other-than-social" constituents of knowledge. Whichever way this question is answered (Latour interprets social constructivism as radical constructivism, Latour 2010, 177f.), it is clear that social constructivism methodologically sustains an externalist account of knowledge paired with a transcendentalist approach of linguistic pragmatism. Thus the methodological focus on the socio-linguistic constitution of knowledge and the correlation of knowledge with its socio-linguistic constituents is a methodological, socio-linguistic reduction of the concept of knowledge. This is exactly the point from which Latour formulates both dimensions of his criticism of social constructivism. While we cannot further comment on the debate internal to the sociology of knowledge (for a detailed analysis of the debate see Kneer 2010) it seems very rewarding to sketch out the transitional perspective in which the

sociological problem becomes a philosophical and moreover a transdisciplinary problem.

In his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, published in France in 1991, Latour argues that the current state of theory is to be characterized as a "crisis of critique" (Latour 1993, 1-12). He argues that modernity has to be understood as a decoupling of two regimes of practice accompanied by an estrangement of thought and practice. Latour outlines these two regimes of practice (Latour 1993, 10f.): whereas the first regime could be described as a constant production of pragmatic complexes between things and humans resulting in so-called "hybrids", "quasi-objects" or "collectives", the second regime can be characterized as a practice of legitimization and "clarification" resulting in an asymmetrical anthropology. The specificity of modernity lies in the problem of the division of practice and its legitimation, leading to a constant encoding of (the first regime of) practice – a process in which practice itself and the things it produces have become unthinkable. Although speculative thought has made several complex attempts to approach this problem, which has its philosophical analogy in the subject-object dualism, it could not overcome the socio-structural dichotomy at its core. Latour attempts to show that postmodernity and constructivism do not only represent inter-disciplinary problems, but are embedded in and at the end of a long cultural process of estrangement of thought and practice, forgetting that thought is a practice amongst others. In this sense, the reduction of knowledge to socio-linguistic constituents is the symptom of an underlying problem: the inability to think the material praxeologic in modernity. As correct as Latour's account of modernity is, it provokes not only a reflection on method, but also a reflection on the very foundations of thought itself. It produces an awareness of the inability or impotence of thought to grasp the "real" fundamentals of society. These can neither be defined by individualism, communitarianism or any kind of asymmetrical anthropology: they have to be understood by means of the reflection upon the pragmatic complexities underlying and constituting society. Consequently, any methodological socio-linguistic reductionism or holism falls short of giving an

account of the “real” foundations of society and its problems, leading to a false definition of knowledge and to a self-inflicted powerlessness of critique. In this sense postmodernity never existed, since it is only the radical conclusion of modernity which Latour sums up as an “abdication of thought” and a “crisis of critique” (Latour 1993, 61).

Besides his two-dimensional criticism, Latour is also one of the founding figures of the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), which has to be read as an attempt to overcome the problems of modernity. Generally, ANT, whether or not accepted in its research design, acts as a signal that the only way out of the crisis of critique is a methodological reflection of the pragmatic complexities or networks of actors (including non-human agents) underlying and forming society. Additionally, as indicated by a book entitled *Changer de société, refaire de la sociologie*, in which Latour introduces his Actor-Network-Theory, the only way to change society and overcome the problems of modernity is to reevaluate our approaches to society and things, and thus the way we think and act about objects. In a nutshell, Latour’s works create awareness for the idea that thinking in modernity is unable to respond to the problems of actuality: that thought in its self-inflicted sociolinguistic reduction delegitimizes and suspends itself and its critical dimensions.

#### 4.

Given the political dimension of Latour’s work, it is hardly surprising that among the first philosophers to respond to Latour’s account of modernity, among the first who translated the problem into philosophical terms, there were philosophers with a Marxist influence. This might be due to the fact that the sociology of knowledge has always been committed in one way or another to Marxism and that the crisis of critique not only means a crisis of the sociology of knowledge but in fact indicates a more general crisis of materialism and Marxism. Picking up the lines of argumentation, in the following I would like to describe how Badiou and his “student” Meillassoux translated this particular problem of realism into philosophy, which later

lead to a growing debate on so-called "Speculative Realism" – a term coined in the context of a one-day workshop at Goldsmith's College, London, in 2007 (Mackay 2007, 307-449).

I would like to draw attention to a paper given by Badiou in 1999, entitled *The Desire of Philosophy and the Contemporary World*. This text is exemplary of the transition of the problem into philosophy. In his presentation, Badiou defines the desire of philosophy in the contemporary world and the problem it faces; it is a four-dimensional desire, encompassing "revolt", "logic", "universality" and "risk" (Badiou 2009, 29). Now, this fourfold desire has to be understood as a challenge to contemporary society, which is in turn defined in a fourfold way: as "the reign of merchandise, the reign of communication, the need for technical specialization and the necessity for realistic calculations of security" (Badiou 2009, 31). In order to fulfill its desire, Badiou argues, philosophy must break free from the (structural) limitations of capitalism and of "capitalist realism"<sup>4</sup>. In order to find out whether contemporary philosophy is capable of doing so, Badiou analyses the latter's main orientations. Contemporary philosophy, he says, is dominated by three principal orientations: a hermeneutical orientation following Heidegger and Gadamer, an analytic orientation following Wittgenstein and Carnap, and a postmodern orientation, "which in fact borrows from the other two" and has Lyotard and Derrida as its dominant figures (Badiou 2009, 31). According to Badiou, all three orientations coincide with each other in their fundamental themes and gestures. Firstly, they agree upon the idea that metaphysical criteria for truth can no longer be accepted. Therefore, contemporary philosophy understands itself to be post-metaphysical or post-philosophical. Secondly, contemporary philosophy globally agrees upon the claim that linguistic factors are the essential criterion for truth. For this reason, contemporary philosophy "institutes a passage from a truth-oriented philosophy to a meaning-oriented philosophy" (Badiou 2009, 34). But Badiou warns us:

If philosophy is essentially a meditation on language, it will not succeed in removing the obstacle that the specialization and fragmentation of the world opposes to universality. To accept the

universe of language as the ultimate horizon of thought in fact amounts to accepting the fragmentation and the illusion of communication – for the truth of our world is that there are as many languages as there are communities, activities or kinds of knowledge. I agree that there *is* a multiplicity of language games. This, however, forces philosophy – if it wants to preserve the desire for universality – to establish itself elsewhere within this multiplicity, so as not to be exclusively subordinated to it. If not, philosophy will become what in one way it mostly is, an infinite description of the multiplicity of language games. (Badiou 2009, 35)

Here Badiou commits to a (“classical”) universal, truth-oriented conception of thought and the reinstatement of reason as a critical instance independent of conceptual schemes, linguistic practice and predetermination as well as socially constructed beliefs and social conventions. Philosophy’s fourfold desire can only be fulfilled if it upholds the category of truth and thus remains able to act as a “principle of interruption” to the “endless regime of circulation” (Badiou 2009, 36f.) of society. In order to free itself from the shackles of such “endless circulation”, philosophy must situate itself differently and find a new “style” – essentially: a new method (Badiou 2009, 37). A method different from that of “interpretation, of logical grammarian analysis, or of polyvalence and language games” (Badiou 2009, 37): a method different from a “methodological idealism”, as we called it above.

“What is thus demanded of us by the world is a philosophy of singularity, a philosophy of contemporary rationality, and a philosophy of the event. This is a programme in itself. To accomplish this programme we must go beyond the three principal tendencies of philosophy I have described.” (Badiou 2009, 41)

Badiou ends his text by indicating that this “philosophy of singularity” is a philosophy of the “rational intertwining of the singularity of the event and of truth”, which culminates in a new concept of the subject (Badiou 2009, 42). He leaves us wondering how this new subjectivity might be conceptualized, and yet he makes clear that it has to be understood in other than in transcendental terms. However, the demand for a new concept of subjectivity is not thoroughly established in the paper, which is much more of a cursory presentation of Badiou’s philosophy. Nonetheless, it seems plausible to reflect upon the

foundations of the three orientations in order to establish criteria to answer to the "new programme" and to design a new method, that is, a new approach of philosophy to the contemporary world.

It was Badiou's "student" Meillassoux whose text *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* accomplished the task of providing a fundamental reflection on the three orientations of contemporary philosophy. As we have already seen, the externalist definition of knowledge, the methodological correlation of knowledge to external, socio-linguistic constituents, leads to the problem that knowledge is no more knowledge of things in relation to a category of truth but in relation to the socio-historical movement of meaning leading to a self-annulment of knowledge and criticism in the identification with its socio-historical circumstances. As Latour puts it: "to become a social scientist is to realize that the inner properties of objects do not count, that they are mere receptacles for human categories" (Latour 1993, 52).

Meillassoux's essay examines the fundamentals of the correlation of knowledge to finitude which, though dominant in the three major orientations of contemporary philosophy, poses problems for sociologies of knowledge and the sciences<sup>5</sup>. As if it was a response to Latour's statement, Meillassoux's essay begins with the following sentences: "the theory of primary and secondary qualities seems to belong to an irremediably obsolete philosophical past. It is time it was rehabilitated" (Meillassoux 2008, 7).

It becomes immediately clear that Meillassoux radicalizes his answer to the problem. While Latour's and Badiou's approaches to the "crisis of critique" seem to be compatible with some of the theses of social constructivism, Meillassoux's approach diametrically opposes the latter's fundamental creed and therefore any externalist correlationism of knowledge. Not only does Meillassoux argue that there are internal constituents of knowledge; according to him, there is moreover an absolute, mind-independent quality of things, and the finitist approach, bearing a correlation of thought and being, whether conceived as internal or external, is ultimately the fundamental problem of contemporary philosophy. Or, put

differently, it seems impossible today to think outside of the correlation of thought and being.

Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another. Not only does it become necessary to insist that we never grasp an object “in itself”, in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always already be related to an object. (Meillassoux 2008, 13)

Meillassoux argues that the correlationism common to the sociology of knowledge and to the three orientations of contemporary philosophy has its origin in the development of post-Kantian thought and epistemology. Meillassoux differentiates between three (“systematic”) types of correlation: a correlation of subject – object, a noetico – noematic correlation, and a correlation of speech and reference (Meillassoux 2008, 15). Three “systematic” types or methods, which could be identified with the three orientations in contemporary philosophy (as named by Badiou). Furthermore, he differentiates between two (“historical”) types of correlationism (Meillassoux 2008, 52). The first, so-called “weak” type of correlationism can be defined as Kantian, since it postulates things in themselves, but does not recognize them as criteria of truth. The second, “strong” type of correlationism denies the conceivability of things in themselves, at the same time postulating that language is the fundamental criterion of meaning. This “historical” genealogy of correlationism sketched out by Meillassoux is very similar to the development of the sociology of knowledge, as we have seen: research needs to be done to see if this account is also applicable to the vast and complex developments in post-Kantian philosophy. In light of Braver’s comprehensive book *A Thing of this World: A History of Continental Antirealism*, Meillassoux’s account of post-Kantian developments seems to be a legitimate interpretation, since it is a continuous letting-go of the idea of the theory of primary and secondary qualities and therefore a movement of antirealism. Here, however, it has to be said, that Meillassoux’s search for a realism that can ground a rehabilitation of the theory of primary and secondary qualities does not intend to

restore a naïve, dogmatic Realism, a pre-modern theory of a principal reality or a "reality principle". In contrast, on the basis of his diagnosis of the correlationist foundations of the three orientations of contemporary philosophy, he is looking for a different approach to the correlation of thought and being.

Meillassoux finds this different approach in an interpretation of Hume's problem of induction that can counter the transcendental reading which underlies post-Kantian correlationism. He attempts to show that there is an irrational and dogmatist undercurrent in the Kantian interpretation of the problem of induction, which can be understood as the origin of correlationism and the founding of critique and its methodological recourse to finitude: the principle of sufficient reason. Meillassoux argues against the belief that everything happens for a reason. On the basis of an ontological interpretation of Hume's problem of induction Meillassoux affirms the absolute necessity of contingency and the "principle of unreason" as a point of departure for a "speculative materialism" (Meillassoux 2008, 195). Meillassoux formulates the principle of unreason as follows: "There is no reason for anything to be or to remain the way it is; everything must, without reason, be able not to be and/or be able to be other than it is." (Meillassoux 2008, 99)

Meillassoux argues that without the dogmatic foundation of correlationism (the principle of sufficient reason), from the perspective of the principle of unreason, contingency cannot be understood in terms of its limitations or finitude (as correlationism did), but has to be understood in ontological, absolute terms. This, however, does not imply that everything is chaotic. From the principle of unreason Meillassoux can deduce the law of noncontradiction; with reference to Cantor's set theory and the theory of the transfinite, he concludes that contingency must not be identified as chaotic but understood as a set with the possibility to change at any moment (Meillassoux 2008, 166). Therefore a stable, coherent reality, which is at the same time ontologically contingent, is absolutely plausible. So the foundation of Meillassoux's speculative philosophy lies in this theory of the absolute ontological necessity of the possibility of a "being-different" of the world and the

groundlessness of natural laws, the possibility of the advent of natural laws *ex nihilo*: “Our absolute, in effect, is nothing other than an extreme form of chaos, an *hyper-Chaos*, for which nothing is or would seem to be, impossible, not even the unthinkable.” (Meillassoux 2008, 105).

Meillassoux thus characterizes philosophy as the practice of thinking absolute contingency. Hence philosophy does not only regain the status of a universal and absolute thought, but also fulfills its fourfold desire (revolt, logic, universality and risk) as a principle of interruption of the contemporary world and the capitalist logic of fluctuation. This desire cannot be identified with a dogmatic metaphysical desire; it is a radical openness to the ontological contingency of the world – a fundamental thought, that subverts the logic of the contemporary world.

The political dimension of Meillassoux’s work is already implicit in his refusal of fideism and anti-scientism; it becomes explicit in an interview, where he states:

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 [...]. The great political issue remains knowing how and when we can finally be rid of such a moral and intellectual madness, which the crisis of 2008 was apparently insufficient to bring down. (Harman 2011, 173)

In order to reinstate the absolute position of philosophical thought above or beyond the contemporary world, Meillassoux turns to mathematics: “Thus, we must establish the following thesis, which we have already stated, by deriving it from the principle of factuality: what is mathematically conceivable is absolutely possible.” (Meillassoux 2008, 189). And again:

[...] it is meaningful to think (even if only in a hypothetical register) that all those aspects of the *given* that are mathematically describable can continue to exist regardless of whether or not we are there to convert the latter into something that is given-to or manifested for. Consequently, this dia-chronic referent may be considered to *be contingent while simultaneously being considered to be absolute*: it can be construed as an event, an object, or a processual stability, that need not be shown to be unconditionally necessary, since this would be contrary to our ontology. [...] Accordingly, the absoluteness of that which is mathematizable means: the possibility of factual existence

outside thought – and not: the necessity of existence outside thought. Whatever is mathematizable can be posited hypothetically as an ontologically perishable fact existing independently of us. In other words, modern science uncovers *the speculative hypothetical import* of every mathematical reformulation of our world. (Meillassoux 2009, 189)

With the idea of the “absoluteness of that which is mathematizable” described in the two passages above, two things become apparent: firstly, Meillassoux argues that with the recourse to mathematics (and modern science) a rehabilitation of the theory of primary and secondary qualities is possible. Here Meillassoux vows for a re-approximation of philosophy, mathematics and the natural sciences, reacting to their increasing distance and distinction in the three great orientations of contemporary philosophy. Secondly, the task of philosophy is characterized as an absolutization of mathematics. Here – as in other positions – Meillassoux clearly follows Badiou’s idea of the equivalence of mathematics and ontology (Badiou 2005, 6), an equivalence that aims at the abolishment of the paradigmatic identification of ontology and a form of finitude.

## 5.

In this paper, I have shown how the “new” problem of realism has originated in the tension of philosophical and sociological epistemology, both of which are fundamentally interconnected in theory, but disciplinarily separated. The globally accepted correlation of knowledge and external socio-linguistic, transcendental factors has become methodologically problematic in the sociological description of scientific knowledge. It were the works of Latour that brought this problem to the attention of philosophy, which was already in conflict with its “postmodern condition and definition”. The “newness” of the new speculations on realism lies in the attempt to reestablish the power of reason lost in the current state of theory. However, the “newness” of the problem is not only to be seen in a mere resurfacing of ontological discussions, but in the entanglement of the speculations on realism with a political agenda. A political agenda that is at the very least to

be characterized as a quest for new ways of approaching the things of this world, new methods that allow analysis and criticism to play an active part in the contemporary world: it is a quest for a new responsiveness of theory to the problems of contemporary societies.

Meillassoux and Badiou approach the problem of a new realism with an approximation of the two generic series of mathematics and philosophy. They do not attempt to reintroduce a realism of principles, but set out to produce a methodological realism. In their view, philosophy as revolt, as universal, can only be achieved by the rationality of mathematical logic. Nonetheless, this approach to the problem of realism has not been without criticism. The bypassing of the two generic series of mathematics and philosophy has been criticized by Laruelle as groundless classical philosophical pragmatism. (This is what he calls a “*décision philosophique*”, Laruelle 1998, 39-41.) It is groundless in the sense that it originates in the illusion and misunderstanding that philosophy or mathematics have a privileged access to reality. Contrary to this idea, Laruelle argues in accordance with his concept of generic sciences and epistemology, that (non-)philosophy should relate itself to all generic series, that is, sciences as possibilities of thinking the real. By means of an extraction of independent pieces and materials from different series, Laruelle attempts to make room for a thinking that he calls “*science générique*” (Laruelle 2008, 9-18). He thus aims at a democratization of the disciplines beyond philosophical and mathematical intermediation and super-positionin (Mullarkey and Smith 2012, 2).

While Laruelle’s aim of a democratization of the disciplines seem to be necessary, Meillassoux is right to criticize Laruelle’s positioning of the real outside of thought (Harman 2011, 83). Furthermore, the idea of a radical indifference of the “One” as Real seems to be entangled in the neoplatonic and gnostic traditions, as Srnicek (2010) shows. Such an approach to the problem of “new” realism seems to be dogmatic in the sense that it does not let go of the principle of sufficient reason as a foundation. Nonetheless, it seems difficult to see in which way (other than hypothetical or metaphorical) the recourse to

mathematics can come to the aid of philosophy’s desire to become a critical and creative force in contemporary society. Still more importantly, the privileging of logical possibility over material possibility in Meillassoux’s approach poses a problem, as Hägglund points out (Hägglund 2011, 122). Like Hägglund, Hallward (Hallward 2011, 139) criticized an identification of logical and material, because a privileging of the logico-mathematical possibility seems to be an obstruction to the goal of a speculative materialism. And even if Meillassoux’s claim regarding the necessity of radical contingency is plausible, as is his overall argumentation, it seems questionable whether the identification of mathematical logic and material logic does not conjure the same problems for philosophy as did the identification of linguistic logic and material logic. Ultimately, the problem of a “new” realism seems to be a problem of method set in the horizon of the generic series, without the ground of a prescriptive principle. “New” realism can be conceived as a question of the situation and the means and methods of philosophy in relation to the contemporary society and science. To fulfill this project we have to carefully reflect upon the methods of philosophical research and its relation to other series of knowledge.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “leitenden prinzipiellen Überzeugung”.

<sup>2</sup> “[...] erkenntnistheoretische Untersuchungen ohne *gleichzeitige Erforschung der gesellschaftlich-geschichtlichen Entwicklung* der obersten Typen menschlichen Wissens und Erkennens [sind] zu Leere und Unfruchtbarkeit verurteilt” (transl. by M. B.).

<sup>3</sup> “1. Das Wissen jedes Menschen, er sei “Glied” einer Gesellschaft ist kein empirisches Wissen, sondern ‘*a priori*’: Es geht genetisch den Stufen seines sogenannten Selbst- und Selbstwertbewußtseins *vorher*: Kein ‘Ich’ ohne ein ‘Wir’ und das ‘Wir’ ist genetisch stets früher inhaltlich erfüllt als das ‘Ich’. 2. Das empirische Teilhabeverhältnis Menschen an dem Erleben seiner Mitmenschen realisiert sich je nach Wesensstruktur der Gruppe *in verschiedener Weise*. Diese Weisen sind *idealtypisch* zu erfassen.[...] 3. Ein dritter Grundsatz der Wissenssoziologie, der zugleich ein Lehrsatz der Erkenntnistheorie ist, besagt, dass es in der Ordnung des Ursprungs unseres Wissens um Realität, d. h. ‘Wirkfähiges’ überhaupt, und in der Ordnung der

Erfüllung der dem Menschenbewußtsein konstant eigenen Wissens- und korrelierten *Gegenstandssphären* ein festes *Ordnungsgesetz* gibt.”

<sup>4</sup> For a definition of capitalist realism see (Fisher 2009, 7).

<sup>5</sup> This is why Meillassoux starts his essay with a reflection of the problem of “ancestrality” in the natural sciences.

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