



Onto-Cartography **An Ontology of Machines and Media**

By Levi Bryant

Part of the *Speculative Realism* series

Author Q&A with Levi Bryant

Asked by Graham Harman, *Speculative Realism* series editor

Graham – Let’s start with your title, *Onto-Cartography*. You have always been remarkable among continental philosophy authors for the vast range of disciplines in which you read. To what extent does onto-cartography imply a turn to geography? Are you using the term in a geographical sense, or in some other sense?

Levi – While I think geography is of the utmost importance in the social sciences – in the book I describe it as the queen of the social sciences – *Onto-Cartography* isn’t a philosophy of geography. ‘Cartography’ signifies ‘map’. There are a variety of different types of maps, some geographical, others not. For example, Marx gives us a map of how capitalism functions and is structured, while Foucault gives us maps of how knowledge is structured in particular time periods in works like *The Order of Things*. The discipline of anatomy can be thought as a map of how bodies are configured. By contrast, the term ‘*onto*’, from the Greek, refers to ‘things’ or what I call ‘machines’. In *Onto-Cartography* I’m interested in developing a technique for mapping relations between expressive or semiotic machines and corporeal or material machines so as to investigate the gravity or power they exercise over us so that we might devise strategies for escaping oppressive worlds. I’d like to know how we might achieve escape velocity from these assemblages of words and things. This project converges with geography in that assemblages are located in particular geographical spaces, but is nonetheless mapping something other than geographical space.

Graham – The book proposes a machine-oriented ontology (MOO). Could you please tell us a bit about how machines are a good metaphor for entities more generally?

Levi – There are a number of reasons I've shifted from the language of objects to the language of machines. First, in my discussions of objects I repeatedly found that people tended to focus on epistemological questions pertaining to the relationship between subjects and objects. However, the issue here isn't one of how we represent or know objects – though I do think these questions are deeply important – but rather of what objects are and do, regardless of whether or not there are any sentient beings about to represent them. An object exists regardless of whether any minds are about to witness it. In ontology, I take it, we're interested in features of existence, not questions of how we know those existences; though perhaps questions of epistemology have a methodological priority. My hope was that in deploying a term like 'machine' to denote 'entity' or 'substance', this tendency to focus on questions of epistemology and the relation between subject and object would be mitigated somewhat. Upon hearing the term 'machine' we don't immediately think 'subject'. And, of course, it's worth remembering that subjects too are a type of machine. There's no contradiction, for example, in advocating the sort of subject Badiou proposes within the framework of machine-oriented ontology.

More fundamentally, however, I hope that the term 'machine' better captures my ontological commitments. A machine is something that operates and functions. What interests me is what things *do*. I think of entities as activities and doings. Through the term 'machine' I hope to draw attention to the activities of beings, rather than the properties of beings. Indeed, I even argue that properties are the result of operations or activities. Rather than asking what novels mean, for example, I would like to see more investigation of what novels do. Similarly, rather than asking what properties compose a rock, I'd like to see more investigation of what activities compose rocks.

Finally, my choice of the term machine is a nod to the age in which we live in. Increasingly it's said that we are living in the anthropocene. The anthropocene is the age of the machine. In the humanities and social sciences we spend a great deal of time discussing discursive formations, yet outside of media studies and science and technology studies, we spend far less time reflecting on the impact of machines. This is peculiar given how ubiquitous machines are in our daily life.

I hope that a machinic ontology might encourage more reflections on technological machines.

Graham – One aspect of your book that I expect to be fascinating for readers is your new taxonomy of dark objects, bright objects, satellites, dim objects, rogue objects, and black holes. Tell us a bit about this classification scheme and how it might prove to be useful.

Levi – This taxonomy refers not to intrinsic features of machines – no object, for example, is intrinsically a dim object – but rather to relations between machines. A dark object is an object that is so thoroughly unrelated to other objects that it doesn't appear in a world at all. The existence of such objects is purely speculative because to know anything we must relate to that being. It's merely a possibility that they exist. A bright object is an object that powerfully structures the movements and becomings of other objects. For example, the sun is a bright object for the planets of the solar system, while debt is a bright object for millions of people. Satellites are machines that are caught in the orbit of bright objects. Dim objects are objects that exist in a world, while only dimly appearing and having little force of their own. Examples of these objects would be oppressed and marginalised groups. Rogue objects are objects that suddenly appear in a world, reconfiguring its relations such as a revolutionary group like Occupy Wall Street or Badiou's events and subjects. Finally, black holes are machines that are so powerful that nothing can escape their orbit. Severe drug addiction, certain forms of debt, and cancer might be instances of black holes.

An onto-cartography is, in one of its significations, a mapping of relations between these machines so as to discern their lines of force. For example, we might be interested in discerning how power is structured, keeping various people in the position of satellites and dim objects. The hope is that these cartographies might help us to devise strategies for achieving escape velocity. Generally I'm interested in what might be called 'analytic' or 'diagnostic' political theory. In this I see my work as being in the tradition of thinkers like Foucault and Marx. They analyse and map the layout of power so that we might understand its mechanisms and dynamics. Through these maps it becomes possible to intervene in more strategic and fruitful ways. While it's valuable to make denunciatory declarations regarding oppressive assemblages, these

critiques don't amount to much if we don't have good maps for changing them. Marx and Foucault understood that. Foucault doesn't spend a lot of time denouncing disciplinary power in *Discipline & Punish*, but he does give us a map of how that power functions in a variety of unexpected and surprising ways. This map is taken up by others as in the case of the prison movement, leading to emancipatory struggles that target mechanisms of power and the subjectivisations they produce that would not otherwise be evident as sites of political import. These maps are what interest me.

Graham – I loved your candid discussion about the influence on your thinking of the video game *SimCity 4*. Like you, I belong to the first generation that grew up with videogames, and am not at all skeptical about their potential cognitive importance. But what was it about that game in particular that shaped your thinking so deeply?

Levi – For a long time I had been interested in critical theory and, in particular, the ideology critique of Žižek, Adorno's analyses of the culture industry, Foucault's genealogies, and Derridean deconstruction. I remain deeply indebted to these things to this day and certainly have sought to preserve a place for them within the ontological framework I propose, for I believe there are a number of political issues that cannot be understood, much less addressed, without understanding the agency of the signifier. However, during this time period, I believed that the social world was entirely composed of the signifier. I endorsed Lacan's aphorism that 'the universe is the flower of rhetoric'. Political action thus meant action on the field of signifiers.

SimCity, of all things, showed me the limitations of this premise. As is so often the case, it's not that the semiotic, rhetorical, or linguistic turn was mistaken, as it was overstated. *SimCity* forcefully confronts you with the agency of things and infrastructure, and the power they exercise. Thus, for example, if you don't build roads in the right places, neighborhoods in the city begin to wither and die because people don't have access to jobs and businesses don't come to those areas. You might choose to build a coal burning power plant to provide energy for your city because it's cheap, yet in doing so you produce all sorts of pollution that causes sickness and death in regions of the city.

SimCity revealed a whole other form of power to me that had been invisible within the theoretical framework of the linguistic turn. With respect to the speculative importance of games, I think it's worthwhile to recall Ian Bogost's concept of performative rhetoric. As I understand it, a performative rhetoric is a rhetoric that persuades not through language, but through situating an audience in an activity. The audience's understanding is transformed through the activity of doing. In this regard, games are a form of rhetoric. They change us through their play. Bogost spends a lot of time exploring how games influence us cognitively and affectively, asking what sorts of subjects this or that game is producing. He's famous (and notorious!), for example, for his critique of the cognitively deadening effects of social network games like *Farmville*, which he lampooned by creating the ironically successful game *Cow Clicker*. In this respect, his theory of performative rhetoric shares some resemblance to Jacques-Alain Miller's concept of suture. Not only do games subjectivise us in various ways, but they can be experimental tools for discovering things about the world.

I'd like to see the invention of more philosophical games; games that would function as something like philosophical lab equipment. I'm fortunate to be currently supervising a talented student who is doing just this, applying the concepts of ontocartography to urban theory and the analysis of the city of Cleveland, and creating both a film and a game that would allow the city as a field that individuates affects to be encountered in a new way. It's a new way of doing philosophy that I suspect could be tremendously fruitful in both revealing our own unfounded assumptions – what Deleuze called 'good and common sense' – and that might allow us to move beyond the limitations of anthropocentric cognition.

In this connection, I think sometimes people see speculative realism as somehow anti-human and a-political. I don't think this is the case at all. Recognition of the agency of nonhumans is not undertaken out of any hostility to humans, but – for me, anyway – to better understand why social assemblages take the form they take, how power functions, and to multiply our possibilities and strategies for emancipatory intervention. This agency of things, I think, gets overlooked when one is focused on how humans imbue the world with meaning through lived intentionality as in the case of phenomenology, or when we are intent investigating how the signifier structures reality, or when we are focused on a discourse on norms and how they govern our reasoning and social

relations. All of these things are needed, but I believe we also need to be more attentive to how things also structure our social relations.

Graham – Your relationship to Marx is quite interesting. It is mostly favorable, though most people also would never think of calling you an orthodox Marxist. In your opinion what does Marxism get right and what does it get wrong about the world?

Levi – It's always important to distinguish between Marx and Marxism. I would be hard put to cite much I think Marx gets wrong. Simply put, I think Marx gives us the most accurate analysis of the contemporary social world. In my view, capitalism is the horizon of all social relations, and its dynamics inform and condition every social relation and political issue. For example, nothing can be understood about climate change and why changing our destructive practices are so intractable without understanding the dynamics of how production, distribution, and consumption functions under capitalism and without understanding capitalism's compulsive pursuit of capital wherever it might be. Addressing climate change necessarily involves addressing capitalism. Likewise, nothing can be understood about the rise of religious fundamentalisms and the disturbing intensification of racisms without understanding how capitalism undermines the solidity of the social world and pits members of the 99% against one another in struggles to get by in perpetually precarious circumstances.

The splendor of Marx, I think, was to have 'turned Hegel upside down'. Here 'Hegel' should be understood not as a proper name referring to the philosopher – though that too – but as a generic term referring to the idealist. We could just as easily say that Marx turned Plato upside down. The idealist sees the social world as issuing from the concept, mind, signifier, norm, etc. It is the idea, the idealist contends, that forms the world. This, of course, is reflective of the general class position of the social theorist who works with ideas and texts. Just as the cobbler thinks everything is a shoe, the scholar thinks everything is a text or an idea. Marx, by contrast, was something of a speculative realist and even an actor-network theorist (though Latour would, for perplexing reasons, vehemently disagree). He shows how relations and conditions of production, the physical activity of transforming the matters of the world, inform all dimensions of social relations. He also shows how the various tools and

technologies we use condition us, affording and constraining certain forms of affectivity, cognition, bodily capacities, and so on. Sadly, I think a lot of this focus on the material world has been lost in the cultural Marxisms characteristic of the Frankfurt and Althusserian schools. It seems that idealism has there returned.

With that said, I do not think that all political struggles can be seen as rooted entirely in capitalism. Sometimes you hear what is derisively called ‘identity politics’ treated as a ‘distraction’ from the real issues or issues surrounding capitalism. I think this is a mistake and that there are a number of sites of the political. I would like to see a more pluralistic politics that’s able to simultaneously think these issues of capitalism, identity, embodiment, sexuality, animality, media, and ecology without the smug dismissals we so often witness from political theorists working in a Marxist tradition.

Graham – You are a committed materialist. Could you summarise for us in a few sentences what is so important about the materialist tradition, as well as its future prospects?

Levi – People in the humanities, and people more generally, have an allergic reaction to materialism that I think arises from a number of sources. Perhaps at the most basic, existential level, materialism forcefully confronts us with death, aging, and the fact that we are not sovereigns of our of bodies; that our bodies can do horrible things to us as in the case of serious illnesses such as cancer and that we suffer from fatigue and there are limits to what we can do on any given day. In this respect, I think a cross-cultural tendency to erase materialism can be discerned in all the world’s great religions and philosophical traditions, and that variations of a fantasy of liberation from the constraints of the body can be witnessed in all of these traditions. Whether we’re talking about the concept of a disembodied soul and *cogito* found throughout the western philosophical and religious traditions, or ideals of bodily mastery liberated from the constraints of physics found in many eastern traditions, these spaces of thought seem premised on a repression of materiality. Given the degree to which we suffer, both in the loss of loved ones and in our individual existence, it comes as no surprise that we would ache to erase these aspects of existence.

In the humanities, I think hostility towards materialism arises both from the general class position of the thinker and academic that I alluded to earlier, but

also the anxiety that materialism will lead to the collapse of the humanities, to the absence of a place for the humanities, that will be replaced by the physical sciences. In this connection we see a lot of smug dismissals of the merest mention of science under the title of 'scientism'. This, I think, is more reflective of anxieties many of us have in the humanities and social sciences, especially as we suffer the assault of pseudo-scientific techniques used in accreditation and assessment that's being used to dismantle a variety of programs. Such phenomena, however, do not warrant this sort of dismissal, nor is it a good idea for the humanities and social sciences to put itself in the position of defending Ptolemy. While I do believe the physical sciences require us to revise a number of our assumptions about the nature of being and ourselves, I find this latter anxiety peculiar. There will always be, I think, a crucial place for careful concept formation, critique, the exploration of meaning, and so on.

If materialism is so important, then this is because it brings us back to this world that we live in. It encourages us to attend to physical infrastructure and how it is configured, how it affords and constrains action. It encourages us to attend to requirements of energy as a political factor, both in the form of the calories we need to run our bodies and the fuels required to maintain our social worlds. It draws attention to the effects of different forms of labor on cognition and affectivity, and the ways in which these exhausting effects can also be a form of power or control. Certainly the growing phenomenon of people working two to three jobs just to get by has the effect of sapping energy that might be used struggling for better conditions and of exhausting time needed to become informed so as to challenge such a system. It draws attention to phenomena such as fatigue as a political factor and is one of the ways in which power functions. It reminds us that it's not enough to simply have an idea to change the world, but that that idea must be made to circulate through the physical world forming collectives of people that work together both to deconstruct oppressive worlds and to build alternative worlds. I believe that many of these things are often overlooked in idealist frameworks.

Graham – Along with your books (your previous ones have had a significant impact on readers around the world), you are known as a formidable philosophy blogger. Indeed, I would have to say there is no better philosophy blogger in the world. How would you describe the relationship between your blogging and your more traditional academic writing?

Levi – I'm fortunate to have a teaching focused academic position that doesn't require scholarship as a part of my contract, and therefore to have the freedom to explore what I wish regardless of whether it's in philosophy, sociology, ethnography, literary theory, the natural sciences, and so on. I suspect my research would have evolved in quite a different way had I landed a position at a research institution. However, it took me some time to realise this. Initially I began blogging anonymously as a space to freely explore ideas independent of my scholarly work. At that time, I still harbored hopes of someday landing a position at a research institution; though now I suspect that will not happen given the idiosyncrasy of my work within the context of continental and analytic philosophy departments and the rather abysmal state of the job market. As time passed, blogging increasingly came to be the center of my thought. I believe that despite the fact that interactions in that medium can often be incredibly unpleasant, I've benefitted from it tremendously because it's exposed me to all sorts of people outside the world of philosophy, as well as texts and lines of thought I would not have otherwise encountered. This has led me on adventures of thought that I don't think I would have otherwise had. Additionally, I'm put together in a way that I really can't think without encountering others as a provocation for thought. The dialogical dimension of social media isn't something ancillary to my thought, but is a necessary condition for me thinking at all. I suppose I'm a bit of a hysteric in Lacan's sense of the term.

Graham – What are the books that have shaped your thinking the most?

Levi – That would be Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* and Spinoza's *Ethics*. As strange as it sounds, I think both were the originary forms of critical theory, and both of whom expressed a flat ontology or, what amounts to the same thing, naturalisms and materialisms without transcendent terms.

Graham – From about the mid-1990’s, Gilles Deleuze ascended from his previous position as a sort of fringe special interest to become probably the central referent of continental philosophy. Since you’ve worked seriously on Deleuze, could you tell us what you think has been most important about his influence?

Levi – I think Deleuze has played a key role in shifting philosophy and the world of theory away from the primacy of the signifier and textuality, to a realism that has allowed for a renewed meditation on nature and materialism that also appreciates the sciences. Deleuze showed how it was possible to do this without falling into reductive or eliminative materialism and scientism.

Graham – What direction would you like to see continental philosophy take during the remainder of your career?

Levi – It’s difficult to know what ‘continental philosophy’ actually is outside of geography. Continental philosophy, I take it, is a phenomenon of the English speaking world, where philosophical work is focused on, it seems to me, commentary on major figures such as Deleuze, Heidegger, Badiou, and so on. I would like to see a shift away from this rather Oedipal fetishisation of figures, turning instead to a focus on questions and problems. Given the sociology of contemporary English speaking continental philosophy departments, it currently seems as if questions and problems can only be explored through an analysis of the work of a proper name. For example, one has to write an article or book on something like ‘Deleuze on realism’, rather than just working on the issue of realism. A shift from figures to problems and questions doesn’t entail ignoring figures or entirely abandoning the practice of careful commentary, but instead entails that problems and questions are no longer subordinated to proper names, but that proper names are subordinated to problems and questions. In this context, you would see far fewer studies devoted to single figures, instead drawing on the work of a variety of thinkers in the development of a question.