

Dario Minervini

Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins, and Mike Michael  
(Eds.), "Accumulation. The Material Politics of  
Plastic." Abingdon: Routledge, 2013, 242 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/83891)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2016

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda  
<https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book Review

**Jennifer Gabrys, Gay Hawkins, and Mike Michael (Eds.), "Accumulation. The Material Politics of Plastic." Abingdon: Routledge, 2013, 242 pp.**

doi: 10.2383/83891

This is a book on materiality in contemporary life. It deals with an issue that is not new, and the book itself is not hot off the press, actually it was published three years ago. However, *Accumulation* can be considered an interesting nutshell of the current debate about the materiality and the heterogeneous complexity of society as well as about the strategies we use to investigate and unfold it. In the book, the already classical discussion about non-humans, their agency and sociological dignity, is coherently related to the STS theoretical grammar that is very close to the Actor-Network Theory sensitivity. In addition, the symmetry between the social and the material is just one point of the story, while the assemblage of theoretical argument, which was developed, among others, by the philosopher Manuel De Landa [2006], inspires the effort of the book editors. From this point of view, the ontology of what social sciences should try to inquire is meant as a non-linear network of entities enacted in the world because of their linkages. Thus, this approach deals with the dimension of the assemblages, the properties of things, the things in themselves, the things in relations with other entities and (of course) with society, in terms of individuals, organizations or institutions. The immediate consequence of these premises is that micro (agential) and macro (structural) essentialisms are both considered inadequate to cope with such a complex issue. Gabrys, Hawkins and Michael participate into the "ontological turn" by illustrating the added value of a post-human perspective based on an interdisciplinary entanglement, from social sciences to design through natural sciences, with which they retrace the multiple unfolding of plastics in the social life. Indeed plastic and the related "plasticity" is the pretext to develop a multidimensional argument about the "force" that is enacted by the encounter of such a specific material (as polymers or vinyl) with social, political, economic or institutional arrangements. This aim is pursued while looking historically both at the social career of plastics in the last decades and at how intellectual reflections have been coupled with it.

Because of the ontological view above mentioned, plasticity is accounted for as a socio-material processes and not as a mere property of a specific material. Both the editors and the contributors of the book consider plasticity in terms of processual enactment that occurs in several and different places, where those properties, usually considered owned by plastics, take shape. In the different chapters the analytical effort focuses on how plastics participate into a performative process of shaping their "own" materiality, i.e. how lay and expert people co-shape their points of view and judgments in the interaction with this sort of material. This is intrinsically a political affair involving issues such as power, values, responsibilities. What plastics contribute to enact is, among other things, a shared matter of concern about compulsive consumption, disposability as well as environmental urgencies. The shift from the "taken for granted" to the questioning of (hard) facts and (soft) concerns paves the way to a reconceptualization of the very essence of plastics. Also, the very political side of the story is accounted for as the result of the

socio-material process of enactment rather than the real premises of the social construction of the phenomena under investigation. Hence the answer is how plastics contribute to the construction of the good guys and the bad guys. If the good/bad behaviour of social actors is intended in terms of output of heterogeneous assemblages, obviously the point can't be related to what is commonly considered the critical sociological thought. Here another well-known debate seems to be recalled, though not explicitly. It refers to the intellectual provocations raised with the French pragmatic turn, fostered by the works of Boltansky and Thevenot, introduced also in the field of studies about environmental controversies [Cementeri 2015]. What *Accumulation* states and admits is the fundamental role of materiality in configuring political responsibilities and engagements. In other words, this book can be considered a pragmatic account of a critical issue, that Bensaude Vincent calls "the techno-utopia of the Plastic Age" [p. 27].

The book develops the argument about the multiplicity of plasticity around the following pivotal points: materialities, economies, bodies and new articulation. The theoretical assemblage-based approach is translated in a plurality of empirical studies about the behaviour of plastic stuff beyond the very molecular configuration, retracing how plasticity is unfolded in social practices, in time as well as in spaces. The twelve chapters focus on different aspects and issues: from credit cards to plastic bottles, through the intertwinement of our bodies with polymers devices and environments. The common trait is the multiplicity of the enactments that plastic contributes to perform, and in which it is performed. The multiple futures of plastic objects, for instance, is one of the many relevant questions arising from the contributions of the book. Indeed disposability, which is embodied in many plastic products, contributes to design the relation through time between users and objects. This very interesting point is strictly connected with the accumulative logic of the production/consumption nexus and with its consequences in terms of environmental crisis (and injustices). Here the game of the responsibility construction and enactment is highlighted again.

Generally speaking, the adopted research strategy can be intended as a multifocal observation of something that is in action, that occurs in practice. For this reason there is a sort of mutual constitution between research strategies (and related disciplines) and the object of inquiry. But, as the editors clearly state, this multidisciplinary effort turns out to be challenging because the puzzle consists of different grammars speaking their performative language, according to their different "regimes of truth". Incommensurability is a relevant question not only for the rationalities informing the politics of materiality under investigation, but also for the rationalities of those who try to deal with it.

In conclusion, the book represents another brick in the construction of a wider epistemic project focused on contemporary complexity. Sociology takes a relevant role within this project exploring something that is more than the dignity of the non-human agency. What is at stake here is complexity in itself, in the wake of a prestigious tradition of studies including thinkers such as Morin, Bateson, Serres, Deleuze. It's not casual that a socio-philosophical argument informs this book. And it's not casual that one of the most crucial debates, the one between critics and pragmatists, deeply affects the aim of the book. To say that plastic is "recalcitrant" or that "simply refuses to go away" with dramatic consequences in terms of environmental pollution and degradation, doesn't mean that responsibilities evaporate. Responsibilities are intimately performed, and thus

recognizable, in the dynamics of a socio-material assemblage. Most of the contributors of the book state the urgency to democratize the plastic world they depict. At the same time the intellectual project on the politics of materiality have to be further developed. The political dimension of this project needs to be deepened and the political side of the multidimensional strategy needs to be better investigated. In short, it is the performativity of the research on performativity that needs to be questioned.

*Accumulation* is an illustrious word that brings us back in time, when products were detected as “fetishable” through the process of commodification. As White [2013, 669] noticed, also in the *Capital*, the argument was not simply intended to free ordinary people from the great trick of fetishism, but it was about the way “the commodity forms” were organized and the ways actors and activities were historically intertwined with materiality. But this is another story. Or maybe not.

Dario Minervini

University of Naples “Federico II”

## References

Centemeri, L.

2015 “Reframing Problems of Incommensurability in Environmental Conflicts through Pragmatic Sociology. From Value Pluralism to the Plurality of Modes of Engagement with the Environment.” *Environmental Values* 24(3): 299-320.

De Landa, M.

2006 *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory And Social Complexity*. London: Continuum

White, H.

2013 “Materiality, Form, and Context: Marx contra Latour.” *Victorian Studies* 55(4): 667-682.