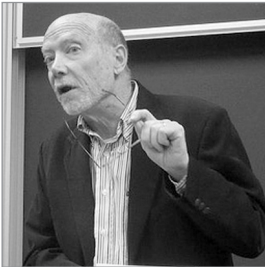


IS MARX A MATERIALIST?

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This paper examines the distinction between materialism (or realism) and idealism, which to the best of my knowledge all forms of Marxism regard as central to Marx as well as to Marxism. Materialism comes into ancient philosophy as a philosophical approach to philosophy of nature, which later becomes a philosophical alternative to idealism, and still later becomes a Marxist view of an extra-philosophical, scientific approach supposedly illustrated by Marx. The paper will review Marxist approaches to materialism in Marxism-Leninism and then in classical Marxism before turning to Marx, with special attention to the Paris Manuscripts. I will suggest that if “materialism” is understood in a standard manner as referring to the priority of matter as the main or even the sole explanatory element, then Marx’s alleged materialism is no more than a Marxist myth. I will further suggest that Marx is a materialist in another, non-standard sense of the term as concerns the focus on concrete, social problems.

Keywords: Marx, Marxism, dialectics, materialism, histomat, diamat

МАТЕРИАЛИСТ ЛИ МАРКС?

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В статье рассматривается различие между материализмом (или реализмом) и идеализмом, которое, насколько мне известно, все разновидности марксизма признают центральным как для самого Маркса, так и для марксизма. Материализм возник в античной философии как подход в философии природы, став впоследствии альтернативой идеализму. А еще позже благодаря марксистам он становится вне-философским, научным подходом. В статье рассматриваются марксистские подходы к материализму в марксизме-ленинизме, а также в классическом марксизме, а также марксова концепция, представленная в «Парижских рукописях». Я полагаю, что если принимать стандартную трактовку материализма как тезис о материи как о главном или даже единственном основании для объяснения, то приписываемый Марксу материализм – не более чем марксистский миф. Я же предлагаю рассматривать материализм Маркса в другом, нестандартном значении, фокусируясь на конкретных социальных проблемах.

Ключевые слова: Маркс, марксизм, материализм, диалектика, диамат, истмат



The central thesis of all materialism, that being has ontological priority over consciousness.

Georg Lukács

Materialism, which arises as a philosophical doctrine in ancient Greek philosophy of nature, remains popular. At present there is renewed attention to the so-called new realism and, in Marxist circles, to materialism. Neo-realists such as Meillasoux and Tiercelin aim to surpass the familiar idealism/materialism distinction¹. Neo-Marxists are concerned with forms of materialism that are transcendental² or “new”³.

In modern times materialism, or metaphysical realism, is often described as an alternative to idealism. Descartes calls attention to the utter incompatibility of matter, hence by implication materialism, and spirit. Leibniz, apparently the first to use the term “idealism” in a philosophical context, thinks idealism and materialism are compatible. Most observers think, like Descartes, that they are incompatible. The German idealist insistence on constructivism following from Kant’s Copernican turn draws attention away from materialism as well as realism and toward idealism. According to Fichte, idealism and dogmatism, his term for causal realism, are exclusive alternatives.

This paper examines the distinction between materialism (or realism) and idealism, which to the best of my knowledge all forms of Marxism regard as central to Marx as well as to Marxism. Materialism comes into ancient philosophy as a philosophical approach to philosophy of nature, which later becomes a philosophical alternative to idealism, and still later becomes a Marxist view of an extra-philosophical, scientific approach supposedly illustrated by Marx. The paper will review Marxist approaches to materialism in Marxism-Leninism and then in classical Marxism before turning to Marx, with special attention to the *Paris Manuscripts*. I will suggest that if “materialism” is understood in a standard manner as referring to the priority of matter as the main or even the sole explanatory element, then Marx’s alleged materialism is no more than a Marxist myth. I will further suggest that Marx is a materialist in another, non-standard sense of the term as concerns the focus on concrete, social problems.

¹ See, for recent discussion [Thomas-Fogiel, 2015].

² Johnston thinks that such Marxists as Badiou and Žižek are transcendental thinkers. See [Johnston, 2014].

³ According to Pfeifer, “materialism” refers to the concern with the economic process of production. See [Pfeifer, 2015].



Historical materialism and dialectical materialism

Marxism has always seen materialism as central to Marx. Since Marx only rarely even mentions “materialism”, the obvious question is, if we understand Marx as a materialist, what this term means in his writings. According to Marxism-Leninism, this term refers to historical and dialectical materialism, the two so-called Marxist sciences.

In Marxism-Leninism, philosophy and science are the two main components of Marxism. During the Soviet period, dialectical materialism was regarded as the Marxist philosophy, and historical materialism was thought of as the (canonical) Marxist science. Stalin is credited as the author of “Dialectical and Historical Materialism”. Partly following Stalin’s lead, until the end of the Soviet Union primers of Marxist philosophy routinely consisted of an introduction and two parts: a lengthy discussion of dialectical materialism, and an even lengthier discussion of historical materialism. Such primers inconsistently discuss dialectical materialism and historical materialism as the philosophical foundations of Marxism-Leninism, and the so-called philosophy of dialectical materialism as Marxist-Leninist philosophy.

Neither Marx nor Engels ever mentions dialectical materialism, but Lenin states that both often describe their common position as dialectical materialism. The Marxist-Leninist views of historical materialism and dialectical materialism have no obvious link to either Marx or classical Marxism. The term “dialectical materialism” seems to have been used for the first time in 1887 by Joseph Dietzgen after Marx’s death in 1883, and then again in Plekhanov’s *Development of the Monist View of History* (1891). Dialectical Materialism is often taken as the philosophy of Marxism, and, since Marx and Marxism supposedly hold the same view, as Marx’s view as well.

Dialectical materialism is usually regarded as a hybrid based on the mechanistic materialism of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, and on Hegel’s so-called dialectical idealism. According to Guest, “the only world outlook which is based scientifically on the sum-total of available human knowledge” arose from the “negation” of Hegelian philosophy [Guest, 1939]. The canonical sources of dialectical materialism supposedly lie in Engels’ *SOCIALISM: Utopian and Scientific* and in *Anti-Dühring* from which the former study is drawn. The latter book provides a connected exposition of the view supposedly common to Marx and Engels.

Marxists often mistakenly claim dialectical materialism was first formulated in Marx’s *Poverty of Philosophy* and in the “Communist Manifesto.” According to Engels, he and Marx were the only ones to apply the conception of dialectic stemming from post-Kantian German idealism as the materialist conception of nature and history. Marx and Engels had



rather different views of dialectic. Engels applied dialectic to nature in his last, unfinished work on the *Dialectics of Nature*, something of which there is not the slightest trace in Marx's writings.

The relation between dialectical materialism and historical materialism remains unclear. Engels accords Marx priority in laying the foundations of their supposedly joint theory through his discovery of the basic principles of economics and history. He correctly implies Marx's work stands on its own. Stalin simply inverts Engels' claim in suggesting that Marx's supposed theory of historical materialism derives from Engels' dialectical materialism. According to Stalin, "historical materialism is the extension of the principle of dialectical materialism to the study of social life" [Stalin, 2013]. Since historical materialism follows from dialectical materialism, Stalin implies that Engels, not Marx, is the founder of Marxism, which underlies even Marx's view. This reading of the relation of Marx and Engels is impossible, even absurd. It grotesquely suggests that Engels, Marx's disciple, discovered Marx's theories, by which he was in fact inspired, on the grounds that Marx's position is contained within Marxism.

Engels, Feuerbach and Marxist materialism

The Marxist-Leninist views of histomat and diamat identify ways Marx is still understood in the Marxist debate, but that have no clear link to Marx's own writings. At most accounts of these two Marxist sciences enable us to point to the difference between Marxism-Leninism, in which they are centrally important, and classical Marxism, in which they do not occur.

The alleged sciences of histomat and diamat presuppose the distinction between Hegelian idealism and Marxian materialism. Marxist materialism, which supposedly refers to a way Marx and his epigones leave philosophy behind, arises in the wake of the complex debate concerning Kant's vexed view of the thing in itself. Plato distinguishes between objects in the world in which we live, or appearances, and forms that, if there is knowledge, either are or at least in principle could be given in intellectual intuition. Kant denies intellectual intuition in limiting knowledge to experience. He reformulates the Platonic distinction between forms and appearances in his view of the thing in itself that is, as he says, "intelligible in its action as a thing in itself and as sensible in the effects of that action as an appearance in the world of sense" [Kant, 1998, p. 535].

Plato argues for the notorious theory of ideas in claiming that on grounds of nature and nurture some among us can directly intuit the forms. Kant's view of the thing in itself, in which he reformulates the Platonic view of forms, is confusing and confused. Kant's reformulation suggests the same concept can be understood as the limit of knowledge and as the



ontological cause of which experience and knowledge is the effect. This simplistic statement should not be understood as adequately describing Kant's complex view. Suffice it to say here that, as Maimon points out, Kant is best understood as a moderate skeptic. The latter holds that all knowledge begins in experience, but we do not and cannot experience the thing in itself, or, if this term takes a plural, things in themselves.

Kant regards the thing in itself as central to the critical philosophy. Yet it was rejected by most of his contemporaries, above all by Fichte, who loudly and insistently claimed to be the only one to really understand the critical philosophy. Observers react to Kant's view of the thing in itself in at least three main ways: in claiming that Kant's argument in favor of this concept is unconvincing, in further claiming against Kant that the critical philosophy supports a claim for knowledge of the thing in itself, and in finally claiming against Kant that we can and do know the mind-independent world as it is. The first point is pressed by Fichte, who thinks the thing in itself contradicts the critical philosophy, which Kant bases on mere appearances only. The second interpretation attributes to Kant a view sometimes called the double aspect theory, and for which there is textual evidence, that appearances are appearances of the mind-independent real. This view, which is later taken over by Husserl, implies we can make out the anti-Platonic inference from effect to cause. This claim, which is frequently made or at least assumed, has never been demonstrated. Allison is the main representative of this approach at present. The third view is argued by those who think, in denying Plato's rejection of the backward inference from effect to cause, that we can and do know the mind-independent world, not merely as it appears, but as it is. This latter approach, which goes back in the tradition at least to Parmenides, is central to Plato, to Descartes and other modern thinkers, and also to Marxism, which, from this perspective is very much in phase with the modern interest in what is often called metaphysical realism.

Marxism routinely bases the claim to know the mind-independent world as it is on materialism. Engels invented the familiar materialist Marxist approach to cognition shortly after Marx died. At the time materialism was in the air, for instance in Fichte's distinction between idealism and materialism, in the rapid decline of German idealism and the equally rapid rise of modern science after Hegel's death, and in Lange's influential *History of Materialism*. Engels distinguishes sharply between Marx and classical German philosophy.

Engels turns German idealism against it in arguing in favor of a materialist approach to epistemology. He draws on Fichte and Schelling to argue against idealism. Fichte strongly rejects the concept of the thing in itself as incompatible with the critical philosophy. Engels, who rejects Kantian cognitive skepticism, claims that we can and do know the thing in itself through natural science. In this way he anticipates contemporary



interest in philosophical naturalism. Engels accepts Fichte's view for the incompatibility between idealism and materialism. As a result, he takes over Fichte's view of the incompatibility of idealism and dogmatism (or materialism), or a cognitive theory based on the thing in itself. He further adopts Schelling's view that Hegel's position is abstract, unable to grasp existence, which he generalizes to apply to idealism in all its forms.

Engels' approach to Marx follows Fichte's view of idealism and materialism as utterly opposed, hence incompatible. Yet unlike Fichte, he rejects idealism in favor of materialism. Engels correctly thinks that Marx's position emerges out of his early critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. He interprets this critique through the alleged incompatibility of idealism and materialism. According to Engels, Hegel, an idealist, incorrectly goes from the mind to the world, but materialism correctly rises from the world to the mind.

Engels correctly notes that Marx formulates his position in part under the influence of Feuerbach, but enormously exaggerates the latter's influence and philosophical stature. The latter was a young Hegelian, and a minor Hegelian critic as well as an influential commentator on religion. Engels, who clearly overestimates Feuerbach's importance, thinks he was at the time the only outstanding philosophical genius.

According to Engels, Marx follows Feuerbach from idealism to materialism, in short from classical German philosophy to the supposed science of modern industrial society. Engels, who thinks that Marx discovered the law of the development of human history, describes Marx as a social scientist in suggesting that materialism is a scientific doctrine.

Engels, who created Marxism in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, argues that Marx is a materialist. Materialism is traditionally understood as a form of monism in which everything can at least in principle be explained in terms of matter as the single basic building block of the universe in eliminating spirit, which simply has no role to play. This view returns in Engels, who links it to a recommendation about philosophical method.

Engels understands "materialism" in standard philosophical fashion as the view that "nature is the sole reality" [Engels, 1941, p. 9]. He takes a quasi-Cartesian, dualist approach to materialism, which he understands as the denial of idealism. Idealists like Hegel make spirit primary, and materialism makes nature primary. In a famous passage in the second afterword to *Capital*, Marx suggests that Hegelian dialectic is inverted or upside down and must be turned right side up. Following Marx, Engels suggests that Hegelian idealism represents materialism turned upside down. Materialism, which takes different forms dependent on the stage of natural science, was in the last century mechanical. It was unable to comprehend historical development of nature. In fine, "materialism" means "sacrificing what cannot be brought into harmony with the facts".



Engels links his view about materialism with a recommendation about method. In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes suggests the usefulness of relying on method to overcome disagreement. Engels, who like Descartes, distinguishes between thought and being or substance, similarly relies on method to distinguish between idealism and materialism. According to Engels, idealism and materialism employ diametrically opposing methods. Idealism, which is abstract, is exemplified by Hegel, who mistakenly proceeds downward from the subject to the object, or from thought to being. But materialism, which is concrete, and which is illustrated by Marx, correctly takes the contrary direction in rising from being to thought.

Critical remarks on Engels' view of materialism

Engels' remarks on materialism simultaneously distinguish materialism from idealism, criticize idealism and suggest the proper approach to knowledge. Since it would go beyond the limits of this paper to characterize Hegel, in response it will suffice to comment on Engels' case for materialism.

His general understanding of materialism and its relation to idealism do not innovate. His secular concern to highlight the priority of nature over spirit agrees, for instance, with the emergence of Darwinian evolution in the middle of the nineteenth century, which Engels takes as suggesting that finally everything is nature. According to Engels, matter is not a product of mind, which is a product of matter. His critique of idealism is based on his preference for materialism, not on his analysis, say, of idealism in general, nor of a particular form of idealism. Like many other critics of idealism, he assumes idealism is an indefensible doctrine for which there is an obvious alternative. This appreciation reflects the Young Hegelian view that philosophy comes to a peak and to an end in Hegel, and then gives way to natural science.

When Engels was active in the second half of the nineteenth natural science was developing very rapidly. Though he does not simply reject philosophy, he thinks natural science does not depend on and lies beyond philosophy. According to Engels, Hegelian idealism has two useful accomplishments: it comprehends historical development and shows us the way from system to "real positive knowledge of the world" [Engels, 1941, p. 15].

Engels' philosophical preference for materialism over idealism fails in at least three ways: as a reflection theory of knowledge, as an autonomous natural scientific approach to knowledge that in virtue of the distinction in kind between matter and spirit, or again between idealism and materialism, lies beyond philosophy, and as an interpretation of Hegel. The reflection theory of knowledge, which is very old,



is already mentioned in the tenth book of the *Republic*, where Socrates suggests carrying around a mirror. This view is often later restated by many observers, including Bacon, Engels, Lenin, Wittgenstein and so on. This approach is presupposes that the effect or idea in the mind correctly reflects the cause or mind-independent object. Yet this argument fails since, as Plato, who rejected the backward inference from effect to cause already knew, it cannot be shown that the idea in the mind correctly reflects the mind-independent world.

Engels prefers materialism to idealism since he thinks that modern natural science is independent of philosophy. Plato makes natural science and mathematics dependent on philosophy, or dialectic that grasps the truth of their first principles. Modern science often urges that it no longer depends on philosophy. Newton famously thinks science makes no hypotheses, hence eschews metaphysics. Kant and Hegel both object that natural science is not independent of, but rather dependent on, metaphysics, or assumptions that can be argued philosophically but not otherwise justified. Thus natural science assumes but cannot show that it progressively “unveils” nature as it is.

Engels finally refutes a Hegelian strawman. His claim that idealism proceeds from thought to being, from the mind to the world, simply inverts Hegel’s view. In the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel describes an experiential approach to cognition. Cognition arises on the basis of experience, for which explanatory theories are formulated and then tested through further experience. Either the theory of the object and the object of the theory agree or the theory must be reformulated to bring it into line with experience. It would go beyond the limits of this paper to describe the Hegelian theory of experiential cognition in detail. Suffice it to say here that Engels describes it exactly backwards.

Engels’ materialist view of Marx is controversial. His basic claim seems to be that Hegel is an idealist but Marx is a materialist can be parsed as a four-fold assertion that materialism is incompatible with idealism, that Hegel is an idealist and Marx is a materialist, that as a materialist Marx leaves idealism behind, and that in leaving idealism behind he reaches science.

The view of the incompatibility of materialism and idealism is familiar. It is asserted in various ways by those inclined to materialism or related doctrines, most of whom who, like G. E. Moore, are unfamiliar with idealism. Most such observers are clear that idealism has been overcome but unclear about what idealists believe. Thus Moore famously thinks that all idealists share the disbelief in the reality of the external world. The charm of this unqualified claim is only slightly tarnished by the inability to name anyone in the history of the tradition who has ever held it.

Moore, who never examines the possibility that idealism is older than the modern debate, rejects views he ascribes to Berkeley and the British idealists. Engels is critical of Hegel and German idealism. Though he did



not have a philosophical background, his influence in the Marxist debate as in effect the pre-eminent Marxist philosopher – Marx is often thought of as the pre-eminent Marxist economist or, if there is a difference political economist – has always been enormous. Engels' grasp of philosophy is shaky at best. Lukács pointed out nearly a century ago that Engels did not understand even such basic concepts as the Kantian thing in itself, which he thought was refuted by what he called practice and industry.

A prerequisite for criticizing German idealism is to grasp it. Constructivism, which is central to ancient geometry, comes into the modern philosophical tradition through Hobbes, Vico and Kant's often mentioned but astonishingly still little studied so-called Copernican revolution. Elsewhere I have argued that the central thread of German idealism consists in a constructivist approach to cognition, more precisely that cognition depends on the view that we can be said to know only what we in some sense "construct". I do not want to repeat that argument here. Engels, who relies on the Fichtean point that idealism and materialism are incompatible, also holds the anti-Fichtean point that materialism is the hallmark of science.

Engels' claim for the extra-philosophical, scientific status of Marx's theory presupposes the incompatibility of philosophy and science. The view that philosophy can aspire to, or is itself a form of science, runs throughout the entire tradition, including German idealism. Marx does not criticize philosophy because it is not scientific, but rather because, as he famously claims, it interprets but does not change the world. This suggests his position is intended to do both things, but does not imply that he has in any sense left philosophy behind.

In the "Theses on Feuerbach", Marx suggests his interest in materialism without explaining how he understands it. He objects to Feuerbach's static conception of materialism in which human beings are conceived as an object of contemplation, not in the various forms of activity and social practices. He presumably has in mind the difference between Feuerbach's view, which he considers to be abstract, and his own view of human being as concrete. This suggests two points. On the one hand, an interest in materialism, which is a philosophic doctrine, does not imply or otherwise justify the view one has left philosophy behind. On the other hand, the interest in finite human beings as active in the social world is specifically compatible with Fichte's view. Fichte influenced the Young Hegelians in general, especially Feuerbach, von Cieszkowski and Hess, who were concerned with Fichte as an alternative to Hegel in the early 1840s.



Materialism in Marx's writings

Marxists, non-Marxists and anti-Marxists understand Marx's supposed materialism [Klein, 1988, p. 183–197] in two main ways: as linked to ancient Greek philosophy of nature, but as non-philosophical science. Though Marx himself says little about materialism, Marxists routinely argue for the superiority of Marx's position through the alleged incompatibility between materialism (or realism) and idealism. Others deny the superiority of materialism or even the distinction between idealism and materialism⁴.

Marxian "materialism" is important in Marxism, but depending on how the term is understood, less so, even unimportant, or, on the contrary, important for Marx. Marx devotes very little attention directly to this theme. In classical German philosophy "materialism" refers to different functions and conceptions either directly or by analogy. For instance, Kant says that all rational cognition is either material, hence concerned with an object, in short practical, or formal, concerned with universal rules, in short wholly theoretical [Kant, 1997, p. 1].

In Marx's theories, "materialism" seems unrelated to any philosophical claim about matter⁵, hence unclear. Marx, who wrote a dissertation on ancient Greek philosophy of nature, is aware of the canonical view of "materialism" as a monistic approach to matter as the fundamental substance in nature. In a very short text, written immediately after the *Phenomenology*, entitled "Who thinks abstractly?", Hegel calls attention to the difference between abstract and concrete thought [Hegel, 1966, p. 111–113]. Marx, who works with a similar distinction, apparently understands "materialism" in a non-standard manner as a synonym for "concrete", or practical, as distinguished from "abstract" or "theoretical." Marx refers occasionally to "materialism" in passing in a series of writings in which it takes on a series of related meanings very different from an ordinary philosophic approach. The central theme seems to be an effort to come to grips with the real, or concrete social problems of finite men and women, as distinguished from supposedly scientific knowledge of the mind-independent world.

The paucity of Marx's references to materialism in his writings should strike anyone who remembers that this doctrine is supposedly central to his theories. His "Dissertation" is an example. Marx's "Dissertation" provides a thoroughly Hegelian treatment of the "*Difference in the Democritean*

⁴ According to Strawson, idealism qualifies as materialism. See [Strawson, 2008, p. 23].

⁵ "The name [i. e. the materialistic conception of history] does not convey at all accurately what is meant by the theory. It means that all the mass phenomena of history of history are determined by economic motives. This view has no essential connection with materialism in the philosophic sense. Materialism in the philosophical sense may be defined as the theory that all apparently mental occurrences either are really physical, or at any rate have purely physical causes" [Russel, 1975, p. 75].



and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature” (*Differenz der demokritischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie*). Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus were followers of Greek atomism, or the general view that literally everything can be explained in terms of atoms and the void, a view that anticipates some, but not all later forms of materialism. This text, which includes a description of the different views of philosophy of nature in Democritus and Epicurus, then a more detailed account of the difference in their respective views of physics, and criticism of Plutarch’s critique of Epicurean theology, mentions neither idealism nor materialism.

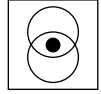
Marx’s approach to ancient materialism is influenced by Hegel’s view of difference (*Differenz*). According to Hegel, philosophy should acknowledge but also to overcome difference through a unified conceptual framework. Kant’s influence was immediate and long-lasting. The young Hegel is and later remains a nonstandard kind of Kantian. Fichte and Schelling, with Hegel the most important post-Kantian idealists, propose, in Hegel’s eyes, forms of the one true philosophical system [Hegel, 1977].

Marx apparently never discusses materialism in detail in his enormous corpus. He refers to it in passing in various later works, including the “Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*”, the *Paris Manuscripts*, the *Holy Family*, and the “Theses on Feuerbach,” but surprisingly not at all in either the famous Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*, nor in *Capital I* and only once in the *Grundrisse*.

Here are some examples. In *The Holy Family*, Marx discusses the so-called “Critical Battle Against Materialism” in rapid remarks on d’Holbach, Helvétius and other eighteenth century French authors. In later texts he says even less about “materialism”, which is either wholly absent or merely mentioned in passing. For instance in *Capital I*, apparently the only reference to materialism is in a footnote in the chapter on “Machinery and Modern Industry”, just after an important reference to Vico, where he remarks that: “It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion than... to develop [them] from the actual relations of life” in adding that the “latter method is the only materialistic, and therefore the only scientific one” [Marx, 2005, p. 372–373]. In the third volume of the *Theories of Surplus Value* he notes in passing the difference between “the lofty idealism of bourgeois political economy” and “the crude materialism directed exclusively towards the satisfaction of coarse appetites” of the “proletarian opposition” [Marx, 1971, p. 267].

Marx’s non-standard view of materialism

Though Marx never analyzes “materialism” in detail, he says enough about it to infer that he does not use this term in standard fashion as an ontological designation for the building blocks of the universe, but rather



in non-standard fashion as referring to concrete social problems that must be resolved practically as opposed to abstract philosophical debate. I want now to illustrate this non-Marxist interpretation of Marxian materialism through remarks on three passages in the *Paris Manuscripts*.

In the first passage, Marx refers to a number of opposites (subjectivity and objectivism, spiritualism and materialism, activity and suffering) in suggesting in passing that “the resolution of the *theoretical* antitheses is *only* possible in a *practical* way, by virtue of the practical energy of man. Their resolution is therefore by no means merely a problem of understanding, but a *real* problem of life, which *philosophy* could not solve precisely because it conceived this problem as *merely* a theoretical one” [Marx, Engels, 2010, p. 302].

Marx is here working with a series of opposites, whose difference calls for a “resolution” that, since it cannot be theoretical, must be practical. In this passage, “understanding” stands in for “[philosophical] theory”. The alternative is practice, or “the practical energy of man”. Problems of theory are not real in that they are, as Marx claims, not problems of life, but rather theoretical problems. Marx seems to be implying that the familiar problems of philosophy cannot be solved, since philosophical discussion, which is interminable, only calls forth further discussion. In their place, Marx is concerned with the practical problems of social life that can presumably be solved in practice.

In opposing theoretical and practical problems as well as their solutions, Marx seems to have a Fichtean model in mind. In the German idealist context, Fichte holds that philosophy addresses practical problems through theory that arises from and later returns to the social context. Apparently following Fichte, Marx distinguishes between philosophy, or at least a certain kind of philosophy, which is theoretical but not practical, hence not adapted to or useful for the problems of finite human beings, and life. As Schelling claims against Hegel, Marx suggests that theoretical philosophy cannot grasp life, hence cannot grasp real problems, nor, for that matter, resolve them. They can only be resolved through human activity, in short through various forms of human practice.

Marx refers again to materialism in a series of comments on “Feuerbach’s great achievement”, which describes as “The establishment of true materialism and of real science, by making the social relationship of “man to man” the basic principle of the theory.” [Marx, 1959, p. 64]. His use of the adjective “true” indicates there are acceptable and unacceptable forms of “materialism” but does not suggest how he understands this term. He later relies on this distinction when in the “Theses on Feuerbach” he criticizes Feuerbachian materialism. In the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx equates true materialism and real science since at its high point science is supposedly materialistic [Marx, 1959, p. 64]. His remark here that the social relationship among human beings



is the basic principle suggests a quasi-Fichtean view of all science as anthropological. This remark further suggests that, as he says elsewhere, all sciences are sciences of man.

The third and final reference to materialism in this text occurs immediately after a passage in which he describes finite human being in clearly Fichtean language. This is not surprising since, as mentioned above, Fichte's stress on the subject as active, hence neither static nor passive, attracted the Young Hegelians, including Feuerbach, Hess and Cieszkowski. Fichte serves as the positive model in Marx's critique, several years later, of Feuerbach's conception of materialism in the "Theses on Feuerbach". In the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx writes: "Here we see how consistent naturalism or humanism is distinct from both idealism and materialism, and constitutes at the same time the unifying truth of both. We see also how only naturalism is capable of comprehending the action of world history" [Marx, 1959, p. 69]. Marx's reference to idealism and materialism presupposes their modern philosophical distinction. Marxists and most other observers think that the distinction between idealism and materialism cannot be overcome. Marx, like Leibniz, apparently believes idealism and materialism, which he distinguishes, are unified through a third term, which he identifies as naturalism or humanism, two approaches which at this point he apparently regards as synonymous. In pointing to naturalism and humanism, Marx seems to be stressing both the practical alternative to philosophy, or standard philosophy, which he considers to be theoretical, as well as the anthropological element.

Conclusion: Is Marx A Materialist?

This paper has examined the distinction between idealism and materialism through which Marxism understands its relation to both Marx and idealism. It has argued that, if "materialism" is understood in the standard way as the doctrine that emerges in ancient philosophy of nature, it is unimportant for Marx but central for Marxism. It has further argued that Marx understands this distinction in a non-standard way as part of his criticism of Hegel as a difference between ordinary philosophy, which is abstract and further unable and even uninterested in non-philosophical problems, which leaves everything in place, and a theory that is interested in changing the world in resolving practical problems of finite human beings.

This leads to two results. On the one hand, Marxists, who think they are leaving philosophy behind in turning to science, are rather in fact following one of the main philosophical paths. On the other hand, it shows that Marx is not a materialist in any traditional sense of the term in that he argues for the priority of nature over spirit, or again being over thought as the final explanatory concept. He is rather a materialist in the sense that he, like



Fichte, bases his theories on the concrete or real social context, from which they emerge and to which they return. I conclude that if, as seems likely, the function of the traditional Marxist claim that Marx is a materialist lies in drawing attention to a basic distinction between his position, which is science, and classical German philosophy, then it simply fails.

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