Matter in Marx

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New Perspectives on Historical Materialism

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Like the original German version, this translation is dedicated to the memory of my friend Mikuláš Teich (*1918 in Košice, † 2018 in Cambridge).

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FOREWORD

This book is an attempt to *understand* Marx and his theory. Even after over a century and a half of reception and interpretation, during which time enough secondary literature has been produced to fill extensive shelf space, we are still a long way from an adequate understanding of this theory. Especially regarding its philosophical foundations.

Philosophical foundations? Did Marx not distance himself from all things philosophical with his famous dictum that philosophers only interpret the world in various ways, whereas the point is to change it? We should take such statements seriously, but not at face value. If nothing else, then because criticism of philosophy is always in itself philosophy. Beyond that, Marx adopted a programmatic position based on materialism: in so doing, he has committed himself to a genuine philosophical tradition. Philosophical premises are found throughout his works, including his writings on economics. Without them, his political goals and conception of political agency would remain incomprehensible.

This should not, of course, be taken to mean that Marx created his own philosophical system. Instead of systems such as that of Hegel, Marx wanted to develop an empirically informed theory of society. Empirical science is never, however, without premises: like other researchers before him, Marx made certain de facto philosophical assumptions which he did not always expatiate on. Quite the reverse in fact: he seems to have concealed the philosophical premises underlying his theory from his readers, and seemingly from himself as well. He thus made it easy for both his supporters *and* his opponents to reduce his theory to a few pithy statements. Those not satisfied by such statements alone must be prepared to read his work meticulously and lay bare its unspoken assumptions. To date, only a few interpreters have been prepared to embark on a hermeneutic adventure of this kind. From its outset, Marx' theory was linked to a revolutionary political programme offering its recipients the choice of being for it or against it. Under these circumstances, interpreters felt themselves left with little other option than to prove either the truth or the falsehood of the theory; what it actually claimed became secondary. In the following, this will be of primary concern.

Of course it is not irrelevant whether or not a theory is true or fruitful. But, firstly, we should remind ourselves that we do not read classic works of philosophy and social theory because we believe them to be true; nor, it should be said, because we believe them to be false. We read Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes or Hegel because they had and continue to have impact; and they were and are impactful because they opened up new ways of thinking. Interest in them stems less from the conviction that they solved problems, but rather that they *created* problems, i.e. formulated an agenda to be tackled. Secondly, in order to assess a theory properly, we must have clarity about its claims. In order to gain this clarity in our context, it is important (a) to identify the problems which Marx' theory intended to solve. What practical and theoretical aims did he have in mind? It is also important (b) to elaborate the means of thought which he used in order to solve these problems. Which epistemic strategies and cognitive tools did he employ? And, finally, it is important (c) to reveal the preconditions influencing him (not always consciously) throughout. What was his historical perspective whilst working on his theory?

The following investigation deals solely with Marx and his writings. That means, above all: what later became established as "Marxism" will not feature in this book. Even Friedrich Engels will only appear marginally. Equally, an in-depth analysis of the secondary literature will be bypassed. Every interpreter must surely be aware that he or she is standing at the end of a long history (to date) of reception and interpretation which can all too easily obscure the original texts. There is no such thing as unblemished, pure and innocent reading, and certainly not where Marx is concerned. And yet a thorough analysis of the history of his reception and interpretation would be the topic of a quite different book. Finally, this book does not seek to provide an analysis of the *entire* works of Marx. It will focus on the materialism problem; and Marx' dialectics, for example, will not be included. Readers should therefore expect no more than a few selective side glances at converging or diverging interpretations of Marx and his theory.

As an attempt to *understand* Marx, this book is committed to the principle of charitable interpretation (which Marx himself observed only very occasionally). His theory is to be made as strong and as plausible as possible – but not any stronger or more plausible. Charity does not mean glossing over ambiguities and inconsistencies. If in the following deliberations I draw attention to such deficits, then not only because such things are normal and also to be found in any number of other authors; but also and particularly with the goal of identifying them as agenda points which his successors should have addressed (but mostly failed to do so).

* * *

This book was originally written and published in German. A first draft was critically commented on by many colleagues, some of whom participated in a workshop on the first four chapters at the University of Münster. I would like to thank them all for their valuable comments. For the English translation, I have revised the entire book and made minor corrections and additions throughout. Major changes, however, can be found in Chapters III and V; a new summary and conclusion have also been added.

I would also like to thank my student assistants for their help with the final editing of the manuscript and Sarah L. Kirkby for her, as always, meticulous translation.

CITATION

1. Works of Marx and Engels

Quotations from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels appearing in the main body of this book are cited according to the following format: (35:18 / II,10:15). The first of these two numbers refers to the volume (35) and the second to the page (18) from the English edition Marx/Engels, *Collected Works*. Lawrence & Wishart: London 1975-2004. The second reference after the slash is from the original German edition published successively since 1975, first by Dietz-Verlag: Berlin, and then later by de Gruyter: Berlin/Boston. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA^2). The reference begins with the section (II) and the volume (10); and then after the colon the page (15).

The printed edition of MEGA^2 does not include the correspondence between Marx and Engels written in 1865 and later. This is only available online: *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* digital, edited by the Internationale Marx-Engels-Stiftung. Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin. URL: https://megadigital.bbaw.de/briefe/index.xql. Quotations from these letters are cited with the date and addressee, e.g. "March 6, 1868 to Kugelmann".

Where a text from Marx or Engels is not included in MEGA^2, the older *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Werke* (MEW) Dietz-Verlag: Berlin 1956-2018 has been taken instead. The passages from this work are cited according to the following format: (23: 742). Here the first number (23) refers to the MEW volume, and the second number (742) to the page.

Since the English translations contained within the *Collected Works* were not always reliable, and sometimes even incorrect, some changes were unavoidable. In these cases, the source cited has been marked with an asterisk. *35:18 means: this quotation has been modified from the version in *Collected Works*.

2. Other works

All references to other literature (not from Marx or Engels) are included in foot/endnotes in abbreviated form; the full information can be found in the bibliography.

For the works of Plato and Aristotle, the usual citation method (Stephanus or Bekker) is used; for other classical authors, book, chapter and section are given. In these cases, the colon between the title and the reference is omitted.

CHAPTER I

THE MATERIALISM PROBLEM

Although Marx was reluctant to pigeonhole himself, he left the world in no doubt that he himself viewed his theory as materialist, and that he wished it to be understood as such by others. At the latest after 1845, with his writings on *The German Ideology*[1], his declaration of this view became truly programmatic; and in subsequent texts he makes no reference whatsoever to a change of mind. In fact, this affiliation had become such a matter of course for him that in letters he contents himself with casual comments like "since I am a materialist, and Hegel an Idealist" (42:589/March 6, 1868 to Kugelmann), while in his afterword to the second edition of *Capital* he simply mentions in passing that the basis of his method is "materialistic" (35:28/II,10:15). We may observe: the relevant self-testimonies may be few and far between, but that does not make them any less clear. Accordingly, it has become an established fact, also for mainstream researchers, that Marx was a materialist.

As is to be expected, neither the unambiguity of the self-testimonies, nor the consensus within the research have been able to prevent the opposite view from likewise being held. Marx, as we then read, was *not* a materialist; and on the occasions that he himself said that he was, this was merely a temporary self-positioning without any substantial relevance. This view was held by Max Adler as early as pre-World War I. His argumentation is based on a strict distinction between world view, philosophy and metaphysics on the one hand, and theory and science on the other. Materialism belongs to the former category, the teachings of Marx, being "the start of a new exact theory of society", to the latter. As such, they remain equally untouched by

[1] It has since become clear that there never was a book or book project called *"The German Ideology"*. The texts later summarised under this title came not only from Marx and Engels, but also from other authors; they were intended as separate contributions for a planned, but never realised journal. The introduction to the corresponding commentary volume of the MEGA^2 (I,5: 725-99 et passim) tells us more about the generation of these texts. In the following I will always speak of "writings on *The German Ideology*" or "manuscripts on *The German Ideology*".

all ontological questions of world view "just as, for example the law of gravitation remains the same for the theists and the atheists". Equating them with a materialist world view burdens "Marxism with problems and concepts which have nothing to do with his actual scientific objectives and can only be suited to coalescing his fundamental concepts, which are already difficult to grasp, with the entire laboriousness of controversial philosophical issues". – Joseph Schumpeter argues in a similar vein: whenever the term "materialist" has been applied to Marxian theory, including by himself, this has "greatly increased its popularity with some, and its unpopularity with other people. But it is entirely meaningless. Marx's philosophy is no more materialistic than is Hegel's, and his theory of history is not more materialistic than is any other attempt to account for the historic process by the means at the command of empirical science. It should be clear that this is logically compatible with any metaphysical or religious belief – exactly as any physical picture of the world is." – Clear echoes of the aversion expressed here towards world-view, philosophy, metaphysics, and consequently to materialism, can also be found in the more recent literature. Gerald Cohen, for example, in his sometimes very illuminative Marx interpretation, distinguishes between a *philosophy* of history (Hegel) and a *theory* of history (Marx); he does use the expression "historical materialism", but neglects to address the noun in this linguistic pairing in any more detail. Tellingly, the term "materialism" is not even included in the index of his book. – Finally, Jon Elster deserves a mention with his assumption "that Marx had no coherent materialist view, and that had he had one, it would have borne no interesting relation to historical materialism." Elster makes a strict distinction between "philosophical and historical materialism" and disputes the existence of relevant connections between the two.[2]

Of course, this whole debate about Marxian materialism could be ignored if it were only a label attached to a theory for classificatory reasons. The quotations cited above are indication, however, that there is more to it than that. Firstly (a), which type of theory is Marxian theory? Are we dealing with a philosophical or an empirical theory? Can it possibly claim to possess the authority of a science? Then (b) there is the matter of substantial alternatives. Does historical materialism encompass a social ontology? What did Marx mean when he spoke of "political economy"? And finally (c), the place which Marxian theory assumes in the history of human thought cannot be determined as long as there is a lack of clarity regarding Marxian materialism.

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[2] Adler, *Marxistische Probleme*: 62-64. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*: 11. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*: 27. Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*: 55-56.

Open questions of this nature cannot be decided solely on the basis of a self-testimony, as referred to above. Marx himself pointed out that "in ordinary life every shopkeeper is very well able to distinguish between what somebody professes to be and what he really is" (5:62/I,5:66), and he was not particularly trusting of labels which his theoretical predecessors and rivals had assigned to themselves. The self-testimony of a theorist, that of Marx included, is only a clue. Whether or not he was a materialist can therefore only be decided on the basis of sufficiently clear *criteria*, which in turn can only result from a sufficiently clear comprehension of what "materialism" actually means. A preliminary understanding of the term is therefore crucial.

1. What does "materialism" mean?

> *"By the word materialism the philistine understands gluttony, drunkenness, lust of the eye, lust of the flesh, arrogance, cupidity, avarice, covetousness, profiteering and stock-exchange swindling – in short, all the filthy vices in which he himself indulges in private."*
>
> Friedrich Engels

"Materialism" is a fairly new term for a fairly old family of philosophical theories. Materialist theories can be found in the pre-Socratic philosophy of Greece, as well as in ancient China or India. Friedrich Albert Lange begins his classic *History of Materialism*, which is still very well worth reading, with the sentence: "Materialism is as old as philosophy, but not older."[3] Despite the fact that even in Ancient times it was suspected of being politically dangerous, and that it was massively suppressed during the hegemony of Christianity in Europe lasting more than a thousand years, the materialist way of thinking has never disappeared and so can be referred to as an uninterrupted tradition. The *term* "materialism" does not surface, however, until the second half of the 17th century. It is introduced by opponents of this way of thinking and functions from the outset as a "term of imputation"[4], used whenever the aim is to push a philosophical point of view to the very edge of what is legitimately viable, and if possible over the edge. This edge was defined, at least in part, by religious or religiously grounded convictions, and the term was popularly used as a synonym for "atheism", "fatalism", "realism" or "Spinozism". Although it was later also adopted by advocates of this way of thinking, it has retained its negative connotations to the

[3] Lange, *The History of Materialism* Vol. I: 3.
[4] According to Braun, ‚Materialismus – Idealismus': 985. The same or similar is true of the antonym "idealism", cf. Zeltner, ‚Idealismus': 30.

present. Even today, many people prefer to avoid it and choose to substitute other terms such as “physicalism” or “naturalism”.

Three assumptions. The basic features of materialist thinking become clear if we recall the answers its protagonists give to three philosophical questions. – The *first* arises as soon as we simply cease to take the world in which we live for granted, and instead think about its underlying characteristics. As far as this world is concerned, what are we dealing with? What do its general and basic building blocks consist of? And to which principles can or must its diversity of phenomena be attributed? Is it an autonomous and self-explanatory reality, or does it have an underlying spiritual, transcendental principle of creation and order? This basic *ontological* question has been answered in two diverging ways: one maintains that the underlying building blocks are ideal in nature, or that the world is governed by spiritual principles; according to the other, reality is to be viewed as objective reality, with its existence and structure dependent on neither human nor any other (e.g. divine) consciousness. Of course, one can take the ideal and the material constituent parts of the world to be different versions of *one* substance or *one* principle, and thereby attempt to keep the decision between an idealist and a materialist interpretation of the world in abeyance; but this only succeeds up to certain neuralgic points, after which a decision in favour of the one or other side can no longer be avoided. – The *terminus technicus* which is used by materialists to describe objectively real Being independent of consciousness is usually “matter”. Notwithstanding its overwhelming complexity and multifacetedness which for us will possibly never be completely transparent, it is possible to say this much about the objective world according to materialist conviction: we are dealing with *one* world, in the sense that there is no other world (or worlds) “behind” it which would be completely different ontologically, to the extent that it would obey spiritual principles of generation and structure. Accordingly, since all real phenomena cohere causally, the world is *understandable on its own terms*, so that there is no need to resort to transcendental or spiritual principles in order to explain it. Materialism therefore distances itself from all theories which reduce material phenomena to spiritual phenomena: whether they be sensory perceptions, Platonic ideas or transcendental gods. It equally rejects the dualist assumption of a spiritual substance existing alongside the objective material world and independently of it; its programme is therefore monistic. And finally, it also tends to reject the assumption of purposive processes in nature; it is anti-teleological.

Now, the world consists not only of external objects and processes, but also of us. A comprehensive picture of the world therefore also has to include humans and to integrate in its structure their multifarious

manifestations. The mental manifestations of humans pose a particular problem. What place do they have in the material world? The answer which materialist thinkers give to this *second* fundamental question is that mental processes cannot be afforded the status of a separate realm; far more, they are to be seen as an integral part of the material world and are not detachable from it. This is especially easy to illustrate using the argument that all mental activities are bound to certain material carriers and the objective processes taking place within them: thinking is impossible without a brain. And from the ontological primacy of matter over consciousness, its epistemological primacy has likewise been proposed: the truth of our cognition depends upon the (material) object of that cognition. The epistemology of materialism therefore assumes that mental processes are not *sui generis*, but have to be viewed as representations of objective reality.

Humans, however, are not only thinking, but primarily also *living* beings. More precisely: they are biological beings with physical needs which they seek to satisfy in the external world. This leads to a *third* fundamental question, to which there is an anthropological and an ethical answer. What is the relationship between the natural physical needs of humans and their mental abilities? Are the former inferior and subordinate to the latter? Materialist authors tend to respond in the negative here, for at least two reasons. Firstly, physical sensations and material needs arise from human nature; to this extent they are objective and only partially open to mental control; suppression is often unacceptable, if not impossible. Secondly, it is unnecessary to take the transcendental world into consideration if it does not exist: neither does it have any consequential imperatives for us, nor can it offset the misery of *this* world. In short: from an ethical point of view, materialism defends the aspiration of human beings to be happy in *this* world. And this happiness is not detached from the satisfaction of material needs.

To summarise, it may be noted that the "central doma" of materialism is the primacy of the material over the ideal. This dogma can and must be spelt out in three directions:

(1) At the *ontological* level it must be understood as being about the fundamental building blocks of reality. This then means

- 1.1 that matter exists outside of and independently of mental states, whether they be the states of human or of superhuman beings, such as God or the World Spirit;
- 1.2 that matter precedes all mental states; that the latter stem from matter and require material carriers;
- 1.3 that the material world is causally closed.

(2) At the same time, primacy of the material over the ideal is understood as an *epistemological* assumption. This can mean

2.1 that cognition is primarily cognition of matter and its states;
2.2 that the cognition and explanation of the material world require no resorting to supernatural authorities; teleological explanations are therefore also to be rejected;
2.3 that truth is to be understood as the correspondence between our cognition and the material world in its various states.

(3) At the *anthropological-ethical* level, primacy is understood as humans constituting part of material reality; they are therefore (primarily) material beings. This then means

3.1 that human beings have natural, material, physical needs, and that their actions are essentially determined by these needs;
3.2 that satisfying these needs is fundamentally legitimate.

In the long history of materialism, not all of its followers have advocated *all* of these assumptions, nor have they advocated *only* these assumptions. We can therefore not expect the theory we are dealing with to be homogeneous and sharply defined. I shall return to this point later. Before I do so, we should turn our attention to another important point.

Not a natural world view. If we focus on the three basic assumptions, it is easy to see that materialism is not a self-evident world view. Like some other advocates, Friedrich Engels was unable to resist the temptation to characterise the materialist view as the natural and original view, distancing it from the somehow artificial or unworldly idealist view. He writes (25:478f/I,26:286) that the materialist view of nature is "nothing more than the simple conception of nature just as it is". This characterisation is incorrect. As far as human thinking can be traced back, it seems to have been rather marked in the early stages of its historical development by animist, fetishistic or totemistic tendencies which presumably not even Engels would have let pass as materialist. On the contrary, he would have classified the imagining of a universal ensoulment of the world or the explanation of natural processes through the activity of spirits as idealist. Materialist thinking stems from a departure from such imaginings and explanations, explaining why it emerged later in the development of human thinking. This was presumably also what inspired Lange to add that somewhat puzzling comment stating that materialism is as old as philosophy, "but not older".

Materialism is also not a view of nature "just as it is" because (as shown by the three basic assumptions) it is a theory *about everything*: it seeks to capture the entirety of the external world. This entirety, however, is never immediately given. We only ever have contact to small sections of it and can only ever capture the whole of it indirectly, in our minds. In order even to fathom the idea of *the* nature, *the* world or *the* matter, and then to question its universal and fundamental characteristics, one must already have distanced oneself from the empirically accessible and have assumed a theoretical stance. Terms such as "nature", "world" or "matter" are not spontaneously intrusive terms arrived at through experience, but are products of abstraction and reflection. The same is true of the opposing term "consciousness" and related terms such as "mind" or "cognition". These terms all developed slowly from everyday terms. Similarly to the Greek word *hyle*, the Latin equivalent *materia* (from which the English terms "matter" and "material" would later derive) originally meant "wood", "timber" or "lumber". Philosophical use of such terms emerges as an abstraction from their everyday meanings; it is therefore not original or simple, but the result of a lengthy and demanding intellectual process.

This is confirmed by taking a look at materialist theories. As far back as the natural philosophy of Ancient Greece, undertaking to reduce all phenomena to the four elements fire, water, earth and air presupposes an abstraction. This is even more true of the atomism which emerged in the 5th century B.C.: the concept of non-perceptible, indivisible, basic particles joining together to form perceptible reality is not a spontaneous product of everyday experience. The concept of such particles is a product of speculative thought, in approximately the same way as Plato's "ideas" were; and justification and formulation of this concept require complex considerations which do not arise in everyday circumstances and by themselves. In short: characterising materialism as "the simple conception of nature just as it is" misses the fact that it is a type of thinking which must fulfil many requirements, both historically and intellectually; the objection often raised by the other side that it is a naive, or even primitive and ultimately unphilosophical way of viewing the world is actually encouraged. – In summary: like idealism, materialism is a genuinely *metaphysical* theory, a theory above the whole of reality and its essence.

This reference to a genuinely philosophical character is also important because materialism has always been identified with a certain evaluative stance: with an overemphasis on "lower" needs and a degradation of "higher" interests. Especially in its usage beyond philosophy, this insinuation is still common today. Friedrich Engels was quick to tell us all we need to know about this linguistic usage: "By the word materialism the philistine

understands gluttony, drunkenness, lust of the eye, lust of the flesh, arrogance, cupidity, avarice, covetousness, profiteering and stock-exchange swindling – in short, all the filthy vices in which he himself indulges in private." (26:374/I,30:140). Whether such behavioural tendencies are de facto more common among materialists than among idealists may be doubted. In actual fact, the personal link between philosophical conviction and evaluative stance is more likely to be a loose one: just as idealist theories have never really stopped anyone from acting out of material interest, so have materialist theories never prevented anyone from self-sacrifice to ideas or ideals. The crucial point is elsewhere: as a philosophical theory, materialism is combinable with more or less any evaluative orientation. If it is not bound to the assumption that the human mind is merely an illusion, then neither is it bound to rejecting or disesteeming the mental needs of human beings. For example, the much reviled Epicurean School did not actually propagandise a life of gluttony and drunkenness, but one of modesty and virtual asceticism.[5] Ultimately, very different practical strategies for satisfying these needs can be developed on a materialist basis. They might advocate a secluded and modest life in the garden of Epicurus, they might demand policies of economic growth and technocratic reforms, but they might also deem a political-revolutionary upheaval inevitable.

And Marx? Before I start to address the many different types of materialism outlined above, we need to ask what stance Marx adopted towards the three basic assumptions. Was he a materialist in the sense they suggest? Although prominent interpreters have denied this, there are many indications that the affirmative could be more likely. This claim shall initially be supported by a few relevant comments from Marx himself before the remaining book attempts (a) to provide a more detailed and more precise justification, and (b) to elaborate the specifics of Marxian materialism.

With regard to the *first* assumption, Marx and Engels turned against the idealism of the Hegelian School very early on and stressed what in their opinion was the undoubted primacy of matter. They assert, for example, "that there is a world in which *consciousness* and *being* are distinct" and that the world therefore cannot be changed through thought. Elsewhere in their book, they emphasise that man did not create matter, and indeed cannot create anything "if the matter does not exist beforehand" (4:46/2:49,204). In the manuscripts on *The German Ideology* there is also talk of the unassailing "priority of external nature" (5:40/I,5:22). Tellingly, these pronouncements are to be found in the early developmental phase of Marxian theory, in which distancing from

[5] Epicurus, 'Letter to Menoeceus' 130-132. In a similar vein the later materialists d'Holbach and du Marsais, *Essai sur les préjugés*: 117.

idealism was the primary focus. In Marx' later works, such statements are rarer; but not because he had revoked his materialism, rather because his theoretical interests had become more focussed. Once the demarcation from idealism was complete, his focus shifted to elaboration of an economic theory which should be materialist, but which should no longer stake a philosophical or metaphysical claim to be a theory of everything. On the contrary, it was part of a project to overcome philosophy through positive science; the formulation and elaboration of a universal philosophical materialism was now left to Engels.

The situation is similar with the *second* assumption. In Marx' works, questions of the philosophy of the mind and of epistemology only play a minor role, so that we cannot expect to find any detailed and comprehensively substantiated views in this respect. To the extent that he mentions them at all, they leave no room for doubt regarding a materialist interpretation. This is true, firstly, regarding the assumption of the ontological independence of mind from matter, found in Marx and Engels as follows: "the 'mind' is from the outset afflicted with the curse of being 'burdened' with matter, appearing here in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short language."(5:43f/I,5:30) Secondly, this is true regarding epistemological realism, clearly expressed in the methodological introduction to the *Grundrisse* (28:37f/II,1.1:36f) and found in *Capital* as follows: "To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i.e. the process of thinking, which, under the name of 'the Idea', he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of 'the Idea'. With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought." (35:19/II,10:17) These statements are of course anything but clear. Their more precise interpretation cannot be pre-empted here, however; Marxian theory of social consciousness will be the theme of the fourth chapter. But its underlying materialist tendency should be obvious.[6]

Finally, there should be no ambiguity with regard to the *third* basic assumption. One of the themes treated in detail in the introductory fragments of *The German Ideology* is that humans are natural beings with material needs. The focal point, however, is not the legitimacy of these needs as they are simply presumed; but rather the question of social possibilities for satisfying them. Here politics replaces ethics. One year earlier, Marx and Engels had already made a connection between the materialism of the 18th

[6] It is therefore not easy to grasp how Elster could arrive at the impression that "there is no sense in which Marx' theory of history accords a privilege to the material as opposed to the mental." *Making sense of Marx*: 56.

century and the communism or socialism of their day: "There is no need for any great penetration to see from the teaching of materialism on the original goodness and equal intellectual endowment of men, the omnipotence of experience, habit and education, and the influence of environment on man, the great significance of industry, the justification of enjoyment, etc., how necessarily materialism is connected with communism and socialism. If man draws all his knowledge, sensation, etc., from the world of the senses and the experience gained in it, then what has to be done is to arrange the empirical world in such a way that man experiences and becomes accustomed to what is truly human in it and that he becomes aware of himself as man. If correctly understood interest is the principle of all morality, man's private interest must be made to coincide with the interest of humanity. […] If man is shaped by environment, his environment must be made human." (4:130f/2:138). Here a direct connection is made between the materialist interpretation of humans, the legitimacy "of enjoyment", and politics; a connection which is to retain its consolidating significance through Marx' entire theoretical edifice, even if it is no longer mentioned explicitly in his later works. Without a doubt, Marx viewed his political goals as a practical realisation of the universal ethical basic assumption of materialism; for him politics takes over from ethics.

2. A diversity of materialisms

Underdetermination. The ontological assumption that matter is primary to consciousness amounts to a philosophically substantive and relevant statement, that much is certainly true; and yet it does not answer additional questions which immediately rear their heads. The most important of these is: What exactly should we understand by "matter"? In the 2500-year history of materialist thinking, this question has been answered in countless different ways. It has already been mentioned that matter was originally identified with the primordial substance or the four elements from which sensual phenomena are composed; in some theories, invisible atoms replaced the primordial substance. Later it was often equated with nature, with the entirety of all known bodies, or with the Cartesian *res extensa*.[7] Until well into the 19th century, numerous controversial debates examined the properties of

[7] To quote just two examples: Newton held the view "that God in the Beginning form'd Matter in solid, massy, hard, impenetrable, movable Particles". *Opticks*: 400. And according to Locke, "matter" and "body" correspond to two different ideas, but extensionally they coincide: they are "not really distinct, but where-ever there is one, there is the other". *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: 498

matter, especially whether it is shapeless and passive, or whether it has an inherent structure and displays inherent activity or spontaneity. A particular problem emerged for a more exact definition of matter when an attempt was made to take it as a basis for understanding social phenomena: is society material in the same sense as nature? Advocates of materialism usually responded in the affirmative. Historical materialism obviously also needs to provide an answer to this; we will look at that in detail below [III, 2 and 3].

However unambiguous the evidence in favour of a Marxian materialism may be: we should not believe that it has provided us with all too much information about Marx and his theory. The interesting question is not *whether* Marx was a materialist, but *which type* of materialism he advocated, and which position he holds in the history of materialism. – This is also true independently of Marx: we know *something* about a theory if we have accurately marked it down as materialist; but we do not yet know *much* about it. Like its antonym "idealism", the term "materialism" refers to a theory type which can encompass very different examples. Both terms refer to a family of theories, and family members can, in addition to basic commonalities, exhibit any number of differences. This results from the fact that, on the one hand, the three central assumptions are markedly underdefined and therefore leave considerable room for varying interpretation; and, on the other hand, that they do not form a unit, meaning that they do not necessarily have to be advocated in unison.

A different problem arises when attempting to *justify* the assumed primacy of matter fundamental to materialist thought. Surely its most important justification stems from the elementary and enduring resistance of the external world. This world does not readily submit to human volition, begging the conclusion that it is independent of human consciousness. Marx also drew this conclusion and used it to justify his materialism. It is a plausible argument, and yet its scope is limited. Only the primacy of matter over *human* consciousness can be concluded. Matter independent of human consciousness could still be an objectification of eternal ideas; it could also be the result of divine creation or *kenosis* of the World Spirit, without losing its primacy over human consciousness. A theistic theorist can therefore think and argue materialistically *to the extent* that he is concerned with the empirical world. He can maintain that nature was created by God as the entirety of material actualities, and would then be a materialist in the restricted sense, confined to the here and now.

The sub-assumptions 1.3 and 2.2 deserve special attention because they also address the relationship between philosophy and the natural sciences. Philosophical materialism has always advocated the view that the world is a unit insofar as all true phenomena can be traced back to material objects

and processes. Accordingly, in order to explain any phenomenon at all, it is not necessary to resort to spiritual powers, transcendental principles or divine interventions. Modern natural sciences are also based precisely on this *immanence principle*. They refrain from any reference to supernatural bodies and explain the world in its own terms. This was the crucial reason behind the close relationship adopted between the natural sciences and materialism from their mutual outset; and that means both by materialists and by antimaterialists. In the 19th century, some authors then went a significant step further by no longer postulating an alliance between materialism and science, and instead a *coincidence* of the two. Impressed by the great successes of the natural sciences, first in the shape of Newtonian physics, later in that of Darwinian evolutionary theory, these authors arrived at the conviction that scientific findings contain everything which can be said cogently about the world. There is no need for a philosophy which goes beyond that; any attempt to say more about nature than the natural sciences say will necessarily mislead. What remains for a materialist to do is therefore limited to summarising and systematising the results of scientific research. The 20th century then saw a methodological reinterpretation of this view: philosophy no longer has to summarise and generalise scientific results; far more, it has to orientate itself to scientific methods. Materialism in this naturalistic-scientistic variant has become the dominant philosophy of the day and is often even equated with materialism itself.[8] Marx and Engels have also occasionally been viewed as advocates of this variant;[9] albeit, as we shall see [III,2 and 3], incorrectly.

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[8] "Materialism is now the dominant systematic ontology among philosophers and scientists, and there are currently no established alternative ontological views competing with it." Moser/Trout, ‚Preface': ix. Lewis, 'New Work for a Theory of Universals': 33f aptly summarises what this type of materialism claims: "Roughly speaking, Materialism is the thesis that physics – something not too different from present-day physics, though presumably somewhat improved – is a comprehensive theory of the world, complete as well as correct. The world is as physics says it is, and there's no more to say." On the previous history of this scientistic version of materialism, cf. Bayertz, ‚Materialism'.

[9] Cf. Neurath, *Empiricism and Sociology*, who, amongst other things, asserts the following: "*Marx* and *Engels* are 'materialists' insofar as they speak only of what one can observe by means of the senses." (349) "The problem of 'matter' or 'mind' is solved by the disappearance of the theory of the 'mind', leaving nothing but the theory of 'matter': only *physics* remains." (360) "The word 'materialist' indicates that only the spatiotemporal order and only space-time formations are considered, and nothing else." (360) None of these statements would have been acceptable to Marx, nor to Engels.

Equally ambiguous is the *second*, epistemological core assumption. In its general formulation that mental states are secondary to and dependent on matter, it should not be grounds for controversy; but as soon as we investigate the meaning of "dependent", numerous questions arise to which there have been very different answers. In present-day philosophy of mind, a wide range of views are emerging which can all be termed "materialist", yet which all have different ideas about the type and degree of dependence of mental states on material states. For example, *eliminative* materialism declares all mental phenomena to be illusory formations which have no place in an exact and objective description of the world. *Reductive* materialism accepts the mind and consciousness as genuine phenomena, but deems them to be completely reducible to material processes. For *non-reductive* materialism, the mind and consciousness are bound to matter insofar as they cannot exist without a material carrier; but they are viewed as emergent, i.e. qualitatively new phenomena, the characteristics of which cannot be reduced to their material carriers. – The epistemological-semantic sub-assumption concerned with the contents of consciousness and their relationship to matter can be interpreted equally differently. Here some claim that mapping or isomorphic relationships exist between the contents of consciousness and the subject matter in question, while other theorists are content with functional equivalences which provide us with an orientation within the world. Ultimately, views about the range and reliability of human cognition diverge: sceptical views, according to which we can recognise objective reality not at all or only very incompletely, were and are possible, but likewise optimistic views which credit our cognition with being capable of far more.

The level of divergence is hardly any lower regarding the *third* core assumption. For example, 3.1 can be interpreted with varying force: either in the sense of a reduction of humans to natural beings, or in a weaker sense, in which humans are not *only* natural beings, but also social, cultural, intellectual etc. beings. The underlying ethical intention of materialism in 3.2 consists in concern for the material well-being of human beings. Under the hegemony of the Christian religion, this intention was predominantly defensive in character, directing itself against the degradation of biological, physical, material needs. Stronger interpretations are, of course, also possible, focussing on these needs at the expense of mental needs.

In our context, the link with politics deserves special attention. Materialists have always been seen as politically unreliable or dangerous, it is true, so that even as far back as Plato the recommendation was given that they be

excluded from a well-organised state, if necessary even executed.[10] It is self-explanatory that in the Christian Middle Ages they were deemed to be atheists and, as such, were persecuted with all the Christian and policing methods available. In the 17th century, Hobbes (the "Monster of Malmesbury") was subjected to pertinent accusations and was at constant risk of being thrown into prison or forced once more into exile, even in old age. In the 18th century, the book *De l'Esprit* by Helvétius' was publicly burnt by an executioner. And even into the 19th century, Ludwig Feuerbach had no chance of finding employment at a German university. – Whether or not this political suspicion was justified is questionable, however. Hellenistic materialism, for example, was emphatically apolitical. Epicurus led a modest and reclusive life with his pupils, recommending strict abstinence from all things political. Epicurean criticism of religion was not aimed at the public role of religion, but far more at its encroachment on personal life. In the 18th and 19th centuries, at least some advocates of materialism made their mark as public intellectuals in favour of social reforms. "Here, then, the difference between Ancient and more Modern materialism is incisive: the more Modern variant was a crowbar of the civil revolution; the Ancient variant - found in Democritus and Epicurus - reveres calm, the joy of observation without agenda, and their necessity."[11] Political commitment is thus not the "essence" of materialism, as shown by the scientistic variants of this school of thought prevailing today.

No separate camps. In light of this wide scope for differing interpretation offered by the three basic assumptions, we should not expect to discover a uniform materialism within the history of philosophy, but to count on finding a diversity of materialisms. And that is not all! The three assumptions, each in its own right, are not only underdetermined in content; their mutual link is also weak. It is possible to take one or maybe two on board, as a basis for forming a theory, without accepting all three. It may suggest itself that a theorist accepting the first assumption should also accept the other two; but there is no logical compulsion to do so. It is possible to advocate the objectively real existence of the material world, without having to maintain its epistemological primacy. A prominent example of this is provided by Immanuel Kant who, at the ontological level, advocated materialist convictions, but by no means at the epistemological level. Likewise, it is possible not to begrudge human beings paradise on earth, and to form a theory based

[10] Cf. Plato, *Laws* 907c–909d. Diogenes Laertios reports: "Plato wanted to burn Democritus' works, all that he could collect, but the Pythagoreans Amyclas and Clinias stopped him by saying it would do no good, since many people already had them." *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* IX,40.
[11] Bloch, *Das Materialismusproblem*: 135f.

on the satisfaction of their material needs, without being obliged to adopt a materialist ontology and an epistemological realism. Put succinctly: it is possible to be part materialist and part idealist. It is therefore not difficult to cite theories and schools of thought in which materialist elements and idealist elements are combined. Although historically the two schools of thought have often appeared as bitter enemies, they were not "two great camps", as Engels was later to write (26:366/I,30:133). Far more, they form the two extremes of a spectrum which leaves scope for many different middling positions.

In contrast to some of his later adepts, Marx was aware of the separability of these assumptions. In *The Holy Family*, Descartes is counted as one of the forebears of French materialism because he "completely separated his *physics* from his *metaphysics*" and saw matter as the sole substance within the former.[12] Accordingly, Descartes was *only* a materialist in his physics; and he actually would have rejected some of the basic assumptions listed above; in particular, of course, 2.1 and 2.2., which are incompatible with his dualism. – Of particular interest in this context are the theories of society and history developed from the materialist side. There will be more to say about this in the next section. For now, the general comment will suffice that from Marx' point of view these theories were completely unsatisfactory. He had several reasons for this, only one of which needs be mentioned here: the materialist theories about society and history remained problematic for him not least because they were unable to achieve a *consistent* materialism, and were therefore forced to resort to idealist elements of thought. One example that Marx very clearly had in mind was Ludwig Feuerbach, of whom he wrote: "As far as Feuerbach is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history he is not a materialist." (5:41/I,5:26) For Marx this was not a chance error; Feuerbach and other traditional materialists had not simply overlooked something; far more, their inconsistency had systematic reasons. It was rooted, on the one hand, in a truncated and one-sided understanding of matter; on the other hand, it was rooted in an insufficient maturity of the object of social and historical theory, in the immature state of society itself. Marx believed that the *objective* prerequisites for a variant of materialism which could cope with the specific problems occurring in the area of society and history had only emerged

[12] This comment is from *The Holy Family* (4:150/2:133) within a short abstract on the history of materialism in the 17th and 18th centuries which has occasionally been elevated to the status of an authoritative sample of Marxian writing on the history of philosophy. For a long time, however, it has been known that in this passage Marx leaned heavily on a handbook published by Charles Renouvier in 1842. Cf. O. Bloch, ‚Marx, Renouvier et l'histoire du matérialisme'.

under the conditions of modern society. He therefore believed himself to be in a privileged historical position compared to his materialist predecessors, a position which enabled him to elaborate such a variant of materialism. He had no problem with solving this task by drawing on thought patterns which until then had tended to be viewed as idealist.

Despite his repeated commitment to materialism, his relationship to this line of theory was consistently critical. This becomes clear from numerous comments he makes, particularly in his early works. It is not a coincidence that his famous *Theses on Feuerbach* begin with a reference to the "chief defect of all previous materialism" (5:3/IV,3:19) and further down the line also and especially emphasise its weaknesses. In his later writing, in-depth discussions of former materialisms are hardly to be found at all; and to the extent that he concerns himself with contemporary variants, they are evaluated considerably less kindly than their membership within the same family of theories could lead us to expect. This is particularly true of naturalist-scientistic materialism, as propagandised by Karl Vogt, Jakob Moleschott and Ludwig Büchner. Even if we disregard Marx' hefty, albeit more politically than philosophically motivated controversy with Karl Vogt, the few pertinent comments display a deep disdain for this form of materialism "that excludes history and its process" (35:375f/II,10:334 footnote). In contrast, his pronouncements about certain variants of idealism were comparatively mild, in some cases even friendly. This is of course particularly true for Hegel, with Marx liking to call himself Hegel's "pupil" (35:19/II,10:17). In a word: membership of a theory in the family of idealist theories was for Marx just as little proof of its fallacy as membership of another theory in the family of materialist theories was a guarantee of its truth.

3. The dominance of idealism

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high or lowly,
And order'd their estate.

Cecil Frances Alexander

Viewing the history of philosophy in its entirety, it is hard to deny that it has been dominated by idealist theories. This is true both quantitatively[13],

[13] All attempts to estimate the dominance of a particular philosophical direction quantitatively face methodical difficulties which are as great as they are easily recognisable; as a result, such attempts have only been embarked upon rarely. One of the few exceptions is an investigation by Sorokin, ‚The Fluctuation of Idealism and Materialism in