

SUBJECT LESSONS

Hegel, Lacan, and
the Future of Materialism

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The Nature of Dialectical Materialism in Hegel and Marx

Andrew Cole

It has been rumoured round the town that I have compared the stars to a rash on an organism where the skin erupts into a countless mass of red spots; or to an ant-heap in which, too, there is Understanding and necessity. In fact, I do rate what is concrete higher than what is abstract, and an animality that develops into no more than a slime, higher than the starry host.

—Hegel

A man who walks on his head, ladies and gentlemen, a man who walks on his head sees the sky below, as an abyss.

—Celan

It's time to rethink, if not isolate from the long and often fraught history of interpretation, Marx's most familiar ideas in order to construct a viable Marxian materialist philosophy, or to at least recognize what kind of philosophy unites both his early and late works, which are often said to be distinctly different in outlook and temper—with the later works in fact representing a break from philosophy. Of course, you need high hopes to pursue this project of discerning what's philosophical about Marx, because some of his best readers today, to recall the sentiments of both Karl Korsch and Étienne Balibar, insist that Marxism amounts to non-philosophy, or a philosophy that cannot annihilate itself soon enough at the moment of description, praxis, or revolution.¹ A philosophy that cancels itself at the moment of its expression seems strange, but it's a familiar problem. It indicates how Hegelian such a philosophy already is in its grounds of possibility, with negation as its primary mode, and so

why there were ever arguments about Marx's Hegelianism is beyond me. But this is indeed our problem—the problem of Hegel and what is, or is not, Hegelian about Marx, be he the young Marx who drunkenly caroused in Stralow, or the bedraggled adult Marx photographed by John Mayall in 1875.

Marx didn't exactly encourage readers to be deeply philosophical about his work when he said that "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it"—though one hastens to ask whether once we have changed the world we can get back to doing philosophy, now the prerogative and privilege of all.² We mustn't, in other words, be restricted to performing philosophical reflection only after, as *The German Ideology* requires, a stint of daytime labor—cattle prodding, hunting, gardening, what have you. We can, that is, think about Marx's philosophy knowing that he himself enjoyed philosophizing, lost in a cloud of cigar smoke in his study while he wrote at some ungodly morning hour when no one was kicking at his door to collect debts. After all, it was Marx who, in refusing the nomination for president of the International Working Men's Association in 1866, admitted that "he was a head worker and not a hand worker."³ Marx liked thinking—and Hegel.

Here I will make a very straightforward claim about the Hegelian ideas within Marx, suggesting that he adopts what I call Hegel's "elemental materialism"—a kind of philosophical materialism, dialectical in character, that foregrounds the elements over matter. These elements are key terms—concepts, even—in Hegel's thinking. They are not exactly the four elements discovered by Empedocles and celebrated by Aristotle, but rather the elements that Hegel reconceptualizes in an idealist rejoinder to the materialist determinism of contemporary physics and chemistry.⁴ Below I will define what exactly these elements are, describing along the way how Hegel's idealist response to scientific materialism in the *Philosophy of Nature* offers precisely the kind of materialist materialism (if you will) that would appeal to Marx, even though Marx on occasion criticized Hegel for idealizing materiality, for making what's concrete abstract, and for rendering the real problems of labor and surplus value into airy notions about freedom and the World Spirit. My point will be that while Marx claims to reject Hegelian idealism, he in fact embraces Hegelian elemental materialism both in his early works and in his late works. To turn the thing around: Hegel, I will suggest, stands right where we wouldn't expect him, not only at the theoretical core of Marx's historical materialism, but as the very version of a dialectical mode of thinking that Marx always embraced, a dialectical habit of thought that uses the same language and the same techniques to parse matter and ideas, materialities and histories, stuff and spirit—a materialism that (to echo

Lenin) would be stupid without a dash of idealism and that puts us in mind of tried-and-true “dialectical materialism.”⁵

By the title to this chapter, I acknowledge that I am entertaining anachronism in naming Hegel’s thinking—specifically, the elemental materialism seen in virtually every major work of his—“dialectical materialism.” (Plekhanov coined the phrase in an essay on Hegel, Marx, and materialism.⁶) But I do this not only to say that there is great commonality between Hegel and Engels and Lenin, as the latter two themselves already knew, but also to demonstrate, as if by the collision of peanut butter and chocolate, that in Hegel you have two great tastes that go great together: dialectics and materialism. Any so-called dialectical materialism must come to terms with the features of Hegel’s dialectic that were always materialist, even if those features aren’t materialist in exactly the way we think of the term today or yesterday.

The Materialism of Historical Materialism

It would probably help to start out by stating what’s meant by the term “historical materialism.” Antonio Gramsci long ago remarked that “it has been forgotten that in the case of a very common expression [historical materialism] one should put the accent on the first term—‘historical’—and not on the second, which is of metaphysical origin.”⁷ For Gramsci, there is old school materialism (as metaphysics), and there is historical materialism (absent the metaphysics). He has a point in this emphasis and distinction insofar as it is difficult to conceptualize historical materialism as a philosophical materialism, but far easier to understand that Marxism itself has an interest in history—in particular, in the human effort at making history, individually and universally. To be sure, it remains a lingering question of how Marxism could be not only a philosophy but a philosophy of matter, or a version of the philosophical position that matter constitutes all reality and is even in some unknown way the basis for thought. But it is certainly evident that Marxism, when defined as *historical* materialism, focuses on the practical activities of human beings across time and place, as Engels declares in the introduction to the English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*: “I use . . . the term ‘historical materialism’ to designate the view of the course of history, which seeks the ultimate causes and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, with the consequent division of society into distinct classes and the struggles of these classes.”⁸

Historical materialism, then, can be said to move the focus from matter to social practices and social forces—from raw, inaeesthetic nature and inert things to economic base and the ineluctable necessity that defines the human struggle for survival, subsistence, poesis, and that undoes the selfsame. And this view accords with Marx's and Engels's thinking about historical materialism in *The German Ideology*: "This conception of history depends on our ability to expound the real process of production, starting out from the material production of life itself, and to comprehend the form of intercourse connected with this and created by this mode of production . . . as the basis of all history."⁹ It is here that historical materialism takes up a variety of technical particulars, as it moves away from ruminations about humanity in a "state of nature" to a discussion of the forces of production (i.e., infrastructure, machines, mills, raw materials, labor)¹⁰ and the relations of production (i.e., the relations between producers determined by which class owns the means of production). As a historical materialist, then, you can look at how the forces of production and the relations of production constitute a general mode of production, and examine how over time the forces of production change, putting pressure on the relations of production and generating the very contradictions that compel the overall mode of production to remake itself and reabsorb the aberrant forces of production.

But let's keep in focus the problem, because you may already be wondering what makes materialism so different from historical materialism—if both have something to do with matter in the long run—or why readers of Marx would prefer not to think of historical materialism as a kind of philosophical materialism. Fredric Jameson offers the best summation of the problem when he writes that "Marxism is . . . not a mechanical but a historical materialism: it does not assert the primacy of matter so much as it insists on an ultimate determination by the mode of production. Indeed, if one likes to brandish epithets, it must be remarked that the grounding of materialism in one or another conception of matter is rather the hallmark of bourgeois ideology from the eighteenth-century materialisms all the way to nineteenth-century positivism and determinism (itself a bourgeois rather than a Marxian term and concept)."¹¹ There is certainly a difference in talking about, on the one hand, "the mode of production"—say, feudalism—as an "ultimate determination," or what Engels thinks of as the "last instance," and, on the other hand, propounding a view of matter or atoms as the basis of all reality or (ridiculously) as a model for human collectives, as you find in both Lucretius and Althusser. But as you can see in Jameson's words, to speak of Marxism as a philosophical materialism is to talk of ideology. It is to say that philosophical materialism is ideology, plain and simple,

whereas it is my wager that the elemental materialism we find in Hegel and Marx is a counter-ideological practice that defines what we fondly call dialectical materialism or, for that matter, “critique.”

The Materialist Method

Marx’s method is just such a practice, and we would do well to think about his method as it’s defined by the philosophical terms Marx always adopts to discuss the momentous historical event that was the transition from feudalism to capitalism, as detailed in both the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, among other texts. My question here is: is Marx’s account of the emergence of capitalism from feudalism consistent with some kind of philosophical materialism? Here, I am trying to estrange Marx’s thought, rethinking his materialism by looking closely at his language, and doing so ultimately within the Hegelian frame.

The first term we must encounter is “dissolution” (or, in the German, *Auflösung*). By “dissolution,” Marx means to describe that process whereby political, social, and economic conditions fall apart and decompose into constituent elements before recombining and transforming into some new totality that nonetheless (in the Hegelian fashion) preserves features of the previous formation. To take two initial examples from the *Grundrisse*, Marx states that “the development of the forces of production dissolves” the older forms of production, and that “their dissolution is itself a development of the human productive forces.”¹² He also says that “all the dissolved relations were possible only with a definite degree of development of the material (and hence also intellectual) forces of production.”¹³

What we want to understand is how dissolution is development. And what we want to contemplate is that middle space between “dissolution” (*Auflösung*) and “development” (*Entwicklung*)—decomposition as a mode of composition. This is some kind of “process of history,” as Marx calls it, that eventually transforms feudalism into capitalism. It is a historical process that requires in fact an entire series of co-temporal and, one might even say, spatialized dissolutions. For example, in the transition from feudalism to capitalism there is first the “*dissolution* of the [laborer’s] relation to the earth—land and soil—as [the] natural condition of production.” Then there is the dissolution of all forms of property and corporate life, such as “manufactures, namely *craft, artisan work*; bound up with it, the guild-corporation system etc.”¹⁴ There is also the “*dissolution . . . of the relations in which the workers themselves . . . still belong directly among the*

objective conditions of production."¹⁵ And, finally, there is the "dissolution of relations of production in which . . . use value predominates," and so forth.¹⁶ Marx says that all of these dissolutions, these "*Auflösungsprozessen*," must be in place before the "free worker"—that is, the worker who is by need and necessity "free" to sell his or her labor power for a wage within capitalism—appears as both an identity and a concept.¹⁷

Now, there's plenty that's Hegelian about Marx's thinking in the *Grundrisse*, as many readers have pointed out. But it's telling that he doesn't always use the loaded and expected verb *aufheben* (to sublimate) in these passages, and in fact seems to want to give the verb *auflösen* a dialectical meaning that accounts for its double sense in the German: *auflösen* means both to dissolve and to resolve, a word that in one utterance describes a complex of dynamic physical processes transpiring in an unevenly developed totality—so uneven as not to comprise a recognizable whole.¹⁸ Take, for example, the following remark in the *Grundrisse*, where Marx says: "The historic process was the divorce of elements which up until then were bound together; its result is therefore not that one of the elements disappears, but that each of them appears in a negative relation to the other—the (potentially) free worker on the one side, capital (potentially) on the other."¹⁹ This is a lovely passage, which is strangely macaronic in its language, drawing from the disciplines of history and, as I will soon argue, *Naturphilosophie*. Marx is here trying to show how these historical processes of dissolution/resolution must be understood in strictly materialist terms—and that the *what* of "materialist" history resides at both the macro level of modes of production transforming into others (what we've always known) and at the micro or *elemental* level (what has not been understood). His use of the word "elements"—or, in the German, "*Elemente*"—is revealing in this respect, and this term is, not surprisingly, our second piece of vocabulary to go along with "*auflösung*" or dissolution/resolution. With these two terms, *Elemente* and *auflösung*, Marx describes the constituent parts or "elements" in society that were once "bound together" but which, even after having been broken apart, remain as elements: "not . . . one of the elements disappears," he says.

We already have enough to see what makes this mode of dialectical thinking and writing about history a form of dialectical materialism: what is canceled or "raised" in the dialectical transition is simply what is translated or brought over, in reconstituted material form, to the new formation—in this case, from feudalism to capitalism. This is materialism—or materialist thinking—because we are not dealing with the usual abstraction and universalization in the dialectical transition (which become concretized and individualized once more, in the turns of the dialectic). Rather, we are regarding the process of transition itself

as an elemental re-formation that produces a new material basis, a new material condition.

It has to be said, by way of pause, that these elements are strange things, because they are relations that are broken apart—the old relations dissolved but not yet composed into the new relations that would give you capitalist relations of production. Elements aren't conceptually simple, though they do smack of mereology or what philosophers call unextended simples. When, for example, elements are subject to *Auflösungsprozessen*, they are continually in motion, constantly becoming. So how are we to get a conceptual fix on these strange elements?

Marx helps us a bit in one of his earliest writings, his dissertation on materialism entitled “The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature.” In this work, Marx asserts two things in particular that are relevant to our considerations. First, if we are going to speak of mereology, we have to know that Marx distinguishes atoms from elements, and this is crucial insofar as we aren't to reduce this philosophical materialism to the bourgeois kind identified (rightly) by Jameson. What Marx says of atoms is to be expected, given that his interest doesn't really lie in them. He says that an atom negates its relation to everything but itself.²⁰ It negates its relation to other atoms and to the straight line from which it swerves as it falls. By this swerve, chance is expressed in the natural order; this is also how the purported freedom of the atom is realized, and—preposterously—this is how its self-consciousness is manifested, as what Marx calls the “first form of self-consciousness.”²¹ To swerve is to be self-aware.

Second, and this is the better point, he states that an atom is an element or “*stoicheion*,” meaning that the atom is not reducible to matter or, for that matter, to itself. We cannot even think “the atom as it exists in the void.” As an element or *stoicheion*, however, the atom is thinkable because it is the “basis of appearance.”²² It is not nothing. True, the atom on its own is an abstraction—indeed, even nothingness, so lacking as it is of extension—yet the element is thinkable and, eventually, seeable, the basis of all appearances. It is *something*. An atom is not bound in or by relations, whereas an element is caught up in them. Marx thus prioritizes the element over the atom; this is why he says that the element is “the substance of nature, out of which everything emerges, into which everything dissolves.”²³ When Marx posits the element rather than the unthinkable atom as the substance of nature, he first constructs a materialism—a materialism that is at once a phenomenology involving the study of appearances and, for that reason, also an idealism, as inevitably all this talk and thought about matter must be. Second, he formulates a materialism that can account for the link between substance and self, matter and mind: a

materialism, in other words, that can include consciousness all the way down to a limit point in substance itself and all the way up to that other limit, the substance we call totality.

Owing to its Hegelian origins, then, this elemental materialism involves an unusual Subject. It isn't an identity. It isn't a transcendental jug of faculties. It isn't an apparatus, or a *träger*, or whatever we take Marx to mean—really and deeply—by that term. It's not a subject (now switching to lowercase) susceptible to the hard problem of subjectivity or consciousness, such that we wonder whether matter is the basis for ideas or, in another guise, fret about the base barking orders at the superstructure. It is in avoidance of these reductionist versions of the subject that Hegel won't even use the word to speak of the phenomenological observer; likewise, his choice term for the various modes and motions of thought, "*Subjektivität*," can just as well apply to what goes by the name of "*Objektivität*"—each itself the "one-sidedness" of what is a more complete dialectic. The famous transition from substance to subject, which Hegel describes in several works, is great and all, but it puts us in mind of something to which the word "subject" can even be applied, and this naming in turn tricks us into asking the old materialist question of how such a subject emerges from matter (which is not substance!) or from anything else when in fact—by the reckoning of Hegel's various expositions—the issue just as much concerns the subject's ceaseless dissolutions and endings, its own *Auflösungsprozessen*. The Hegelian subject is always at risk of teetering over the edge back into substance, back into the flow of appearances and the flux of relations that make the subject completely contingent in the first place—contingent because it's always historically specific as this or that epochal form of consciousness whose only constant is the dialectic.²⁴

Naturally Hegel

Back on track. Let's remember that this is still a relatively "young Marx," who thought intensely within Hegel's conceptual scheme, to the point of giving him headaches, as he once confessed in a touching letter to his father in 1837, when he complained about the "grotesque craggy melody of [Hegel] which did not appeal to me. Once more I wanted to dive into the sea, but with the definite intention of establishing that the nature of the mind is just as necessary, concrete and firmly based as the nature of the body."²⁵ But Marx continued to read Hegel, if for no other reason than that everyone else did. And in Hegel he found the cure for his Hegelian headaches.

What Marx took from Hegel is an elemental materialism that, as I will show in the next section, enabled Hegel himself to draw together natural philosophy and political theory, philosophical materialism and historical materialism, in a way that is uncannily a dialectical materialism. Marx saw what Hegel could do with this materialism, as did Engels. So we would do well to look a bit more closely at Hegelian materialism, especially its instantiation in Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*, from which we can derive a few key points about the elements. In this work, Hegel speaks initially and concretely of the four elements as presented by Empedocles—fire, earth, air, water—but quickly begins to explain their deeper significance by discussing not only elemental relations and processes, but also the knowability of the elements themselves.²⁶ For example, Hegel establishes that “elements” are only knowable when they are in a relation to something else, and that when they are not in a relation they are pure abstractions: “it cannot be said what the Elements in their universal manifestations are, but only what they are in relation to particular objects. If one asks: What does heat do? the answer is given that it expands; but it likewise also contracts. It is impossible to indicate a universal manifestation to which there are no exceptions: with some bodies one thing results, with other bodies another.” So, to think of an element is to think immediately of an object to which the element is related. To think of an element is at once to think of a relation. To sever the element from the relation is to dally with what Hegel calls “abstract determinatenesses” that are “still lacking in subjectivity-status; consequently, what is true of them is not yet true of subjectivized matter.”²⁷ Such an “abstract determinateness” is, basically, the atom, which is not given to appearances and is unavailable to perception.²⁸ One can say, in other words, that “elements” help one think concretely rather than impossibly abstractly.

Of course, elements can stand in relation to other elements in order to compose other entities or elements. It is here that Hegel's talk of elemental relations takes up the familiar language of “dissolution” as a key feature of what he calls the “elemental” process—and “dissolution,” as we have already seen, is precisely the term Marx uses in his own historical materialism, which is attentive to assorted *Auflösungsprozessen* (dissolution/resolution processes). For his part, Hegel says some fairly mythographic things when he reflects on these processes while construing the earth as an “elemental totality”: “Air as atmosphere, Water as the sea, but Fire as a terrestrial Element contained in the fructified, dissolved [*aufgelösten*] earth”—*aufgelösten* being the operative term here.²⁹ Hegel speaks of these elements in relations that are defined by dissolution itself, as when “the atmosphere is the earth in its state of dissolution, of pure tension, the relation of gravity and heat.”³⁰ He tells of the “sea

itself” as a “higher vitality [*Lebendigkeit*] than the air” that is “the subject of bitterness and neutrality and dissolution—a living process which is always on the point of breaking forth into life.”³¹ He says that in the sea “millions of rudimentary lives [i.e., ‘a host of luminous species’ that give off ‘phosphorescent light’] rapidly drift away to be dissolved again in the watery element.”³² Where there are elements, there are dissolutions. Where there are elements, there are forces and life forces, processes and life processes, potentialities blooming into actualities and back into potentialities via dissolution.³³

It stands to reason, then, that if an element is said to be at the center of this fundamental dynamic of the natural world (its *Lebendigkeit* or vitality), Hegel will designate the element as a feature of his famous dialectic—that preeminent figure for dynamic relationality. Hegel writes: “The individual identity which binds together the different Elements, as well as their difference from one another and from their unity, is a dialectic which constitutes the physical life of the Earth.”³⁴ It makes additional sense that Hegel would posit “dissolution” as a mode of dialectical transition—the very process by which an element loosens and then loses its identity to become something else, as when “water is transformed into air and vanishes,” or when “water evaporates, the form of vapour vanishes altogether.”³⁵ Here, dissolution marks not the demarcations between all that is, but rather a moment of contact between entities as physical states—the intermediate modes of being in the gray zones of becoming.³⁶ Throughout the *Philosophy of Nature*, the language of the elements is at points indistinguishable from the language of dialectics, so much so that the “element” is the Hegelian “moment.”³⁷ Here, the element is less an abstraction from matter than an attempt to draw together thought and element, thought and matter, in a philosophical position that is attentive to the *mind*ing of matter.

And this is exactly the problem that Hegel sustains in, of all places, his political philosophy, showing us that the materialism within a philosophy of nature can also work as a materialism for political theory, yielding more of those macaronic passages that (as we saw in Marx) combine natural philosophy with political philosophy. In the *Philosophy of Right*, for example, Hegel construes elements to be various. An element can be a political category like the Estates (*ständischen*), which represents a class of persons and prevents them from busting apart into either “a mere indiscriminate multitude” or “an aggregate dispersed into its atoms,” which would amount to no society at all.³⁸ He goes on to say that the Estates are “the fluctuating element in civil society,” a point of emphasis that helps us understand that “society is not dispersed into atomic units, collected to perform only a single and temporary act, and kept together

for a moment and no longer.”³⁹ That is, an element isn’t only a collection of atomic units—people aren’t atoms—nor does the element simply dissolve back into atoms where it can’t maintain its identity as an element. It is for this reason that Hegel—in the same way that he expresses skepticism in the *Philosophy of Nature* that our understanding can divide an inherently unified nature, or that thought can “exhaust” all the properties of an element—here cautions against atomistic political analysis, saying, “This atomistic and abstract point of view vanishes” at a certain moment in the historical process.⁴⁰ For Hegel, water is more than H₂O, more than the sum of its parts or even properties.⁴¹ Suffice it to say that this mode of analysis extends to yet other of Hegel’s works, like his *Philosophy of History*, where he vividly literalizes this idea of a political body dissolving into its atomic units (i.e., into nothing) at the peril of social relations writ large (*in die Einzelnen atomistisch*): “when the physical body suffers dissolution, each point gains a life of its own, but which is only the miserable life of worms; so the political organism is here dissolved into atoms—viz., private persons,” for which one has no use.⁴²

This is enough, I hope, to make the basic point of this chapter, which is that Hegel is materialist, espousing an elemental materialism—whether we want to name it a Feuerbachian contemplative materialism *avant la lettre*, or a practical materialism. It is an elemental materialism that most visibly conjoins his natural and political philosophy and opens up for us a new way of reading Hegel—his anti-atomist idiom of elements, their dissolutions, relations, and dialectics—whereby we recognize the materialist substructure of his idealism. But this is not, of course, only about Hegel. This is about Marx, too, and his own materialism, which also borrows that distinct Hegelian idiom of the elements, their dissolutions, their relations, and their dialectics within the anti-atomist frame. I argue that Marx follows Hegel right at the point where he is supposed to have rejected him: at the formation of his revolutionary historical materialism. That is, Marx uses this Hegelian elemental materialism in both his early and late works, across the very epistemological break that Althusser and his students identified as distinguishing the young Marx from the mature Marx, the Hegelian Marx from the properly conceptual Marxian Marx. I’ll now argue that Hegel is the materialist substructure of Marx’s thinking, which was no surprise to Marx, even if he never admitted as much.

Elementary Marx

So let’s cross the divide, not only between Hegel and Marx, but between Marx and Marx, the younger, Hegelian Marx and the older, anti-Hegelian

Marx. We resume our discussion of the *Grundrisse* where Marx talks about “the divorce of elements” in history—elements that are dissolved but ready to recombine into a new formation in the transition from feudalism to capitalism.⁴³ Marx speaks of historical, cultural, and economic “elements” in just this way in numerous places in the *Grundrisse*, some forty-six times—most often of elements that are on the verge of transition (as potentials), passing through a phase of dissolution to recombine themselves with other elements. For example, he writes about a certain tendency whereby “the free, unobstructed, progressive and universal development of the forces of production is itself the presupposition of society.” He elaborates: “This tendency—which capital possesses, but which at the same time, since capital is a limited form of production, contradicts it and hence drives it towards dissolution—distinguishes capital from all earlier modes of production, and at the same time contains this element, that capital is posited as a mere point of transition.”⁴⁴ The element, in other words, is capital on the “mere point” of transition, something that is not yet what it is—a becoming, a potential. This potential characterizes what Marx already calls “free . . . development”—a question of freedom to which I’ll return in my conclusion. For Marx, as for Hegel, the element is itself the dialectical transition, the dynamic of the historical process.

More broadly speaking, this is the *elemental materialism* of the materialist vision of history that comprises the *Grundrisse*, whereby the decomposed elements or quantities combine into a new quality that is the new situation, the new mode of production, the new forms of relation, and the new concentrations of labor and accumulations of capital. This version of *materialist* history finds expression elsewhere in Marx, including the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 (of all places!)⁴⁵ as well as his grand work of 1867, *Capital*. Of course, this latter text is said to indicate Marx’s break from Hegel, but if this is so, Marx did not break from the elemental materialism that he learned from Hegel. Writing on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Marx in *Capital* states: “The economic structure of capitalist society has grown out of the economic structure of feudal society. The dissolution of the latter set free the elements of the former.”⁴⁶ Marx never tired of talking about these dissolutions, freedoms, and swerves in the historical process. In his chapter on “Machinery and Large Scale Industry,” he writes, “The solid crystallization of a hierarchy of specialized processes, which arose from the old division of labour, ceases to exist; it is dissolved, and makes way for constant changes. Quite apart from this, a fundamental transformation takes place in the composition of the collective labourer or, in other words, the combined working personnel.”⁴⁷ Crystallization, dissolution, combination, and constant change: it’s all there, everywhere, in *Capital*. Indeed, it is out of these

centers of meaning that Marx's historical vocabulary flows in *Capital*, in which he talks about workers "repelled and attracted" to factories, the "breaking-up" of handicrafts into "*membra disjecta*," the "combined industries" out of "numerous isolated small industries," the "combination of the social processes of production," the "social combinations of the labour process" that nonetheless "reproduces the old division of labour with its ossified particularities," the "scattered handicrafts," the "accelerated accumulation" of profit, the concentration of machines, of capital, of the means of production, and of people, who are "the historical motive power of society."⁴⁸

It has been claimed that the elements and matter have "little to do with historical materialism as an approach to social and political analysis."⁴⁹ This obviously isn't true. Nor is it right to think of decomposition and dissolution, as did Jacques Rancière, as simply a proletarian "taste" for fine bourgeois things—the hope here being that the penchant for luxury goods will trickle down to the masses once the values associated with any particular class are free to circulate.⁵⁰ But that readers of Marx could make these points shows you how far the question of *historical* materialism has gotten from the problems of *philosophical* and *dialectical* materialism, which in one sense is obviously the point—these two things are not the same—but which, from another point of view, isn't a necessary distinction in all cases. They don't have to be entirely different. What I am identifying here are the methods, terms, and observations of a historical materialism that doubles as the dialectical materialism it was inevitably to become. Bluntly, it's a philosophy of history combined with a philosophy of nature that is only viable—and that doesn't get bogged down in positivism or scientism—precisely because the dialectic conjoins and subtends both disciplines.⁵¹

Dialectical Materialism

I should say something about Marx's great collaborator, Engels, who recovers dialectics as the law of nature. In his infamous *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels gets his argument going by blaming Hegel for getting everything backwards: "the universe, willy-nilly, has to conform to a system of thought which itself is only the product of a definite stage of development of human thought." Engels elaborates by echoing Marx's famous statement about turning Hegel on his head: "If we turn the [Hegelian] thing around, then everything becomes simple, and the dialectical laws that look so extremely mysterious in idealist philosophy at once become

simple and clear as noonday.” Hegel never spoke of dialectical laws like this, and Engels himself admits that he “reduced” Hegel’s ideas to the basic three laws of dialectical thought: one, “the law of the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa”; two, “the law of the interpenetration of opposites”; and three, “the law of the negation of the negation.”⁵²

So here we have Engels talking about an inversion of the Hegelian dialectic so that—as the thinking goes—we can reductively and redundantly frame our experiences of nature by the laws we ourselves write to describe unseen natural processes—processes that are said, in their totality, to instantiate the three laws of the dialectic. This has to be about the most perverse appropriation of Hegel possible, using his own motif of inversion to say: first, that you, Hegel, ignored materiality, and second, that you, Hegel, had nothing to say about laws, nothing to offer on the relation between experimental science and dialectics. Let’s remember that Hegel’s point in his philosophy was to sustain a material emphasis irreducible to the symbolic languages or laws of chemistry or physics—which is why the *Phenomenology of Spirit* begins in the empirical, in “sense certainty,” where objects appear whose qualities seem to shift as they elude understanding and description. From there, this text courses us through chapters on “Perception: or the Thing and Deception” and “Force and the Understanding”—two object lessons about the world exceeding description—before dropping us off at the chapter on the lord and the bondsman, the marquee material struggle in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁵³ Hegel speaks of elements, compositions, and dissolutions so subtly throughout the *Phenomenology* that no one seems to have noticed how this language of natural philosophy is dispersed all throughout it, all the while waving out of court the various sciences whose *end* is measurement, like phrenology. This is the reason why no one has ever charged Hegel with scientism or positivism (and let’s remember that Hegelianism has, historically, been the antidote to positivism).⁵⁴ This is also why Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* has to be a key text in considerations about scientific determinism, because it is there that he tells us (as if to anticipate a disagreement with Engels) that the elements follow no laws and in fact shun the laws of necessity. For Hegel, rather, the elements express the contingency of what he calls “the free life of Nature.”⁵⁵ If Engels intended to reduce both the world and dialectics to laws, he didn’t seem to care much for Hegel’s cautions about the difficulties of that enterprise. Which is why, to be frank, more people read Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* than they do Engels’s *Dialectics of Nature*.

Marx, for his part, read Hegel so closely as to absorb wholesale Hegel’s materialist idiom, but he was too close to notice this borrowing,

too inside this kind of Hegelianism to be able to get outside it. He only got some distance from Hegel by quibbling with his predecessor about whether the dialectic should be turned this way or that, when the truth is, no matter which way you turn the dialectic, it's always going to turn back. Like some prank toy from the old Spencer's gift shop in a moribund mall, it keeps on flipping. Indeed, when Marx and Engels focus on the dialectic as their point of disagreement with Hegel, they neglect to mention that what makes their thinking a philosophy, what makes it a philosophical materialism and a dialectical materialism attentive to natural and cultural processes alike, is that Hegel had already produced an entire dialectical idiom and method from within natural philosophy, from within the frame of the empirical, and—of course—within the post-Kantian context in which “nature philosophy” really took off with Fichte, Schelling, and others. Engels, in other words, didn't need to develop a dialectical materialism in some effort to direct dialectics to a new, natural domain. Hegel had already done it. This is why, too, Marx will always be the better student of Hegel. For he wisely adopted from Hegel this talk of “elements” and thus didn't need to develop a dialectics of nature (more like a dialectics *with* nature). In this sense, Korsch is mostly right when he says that “Marx and Engels were dialecticians before they were materialists,” but this is true only in the sense that their dialectical habits of mind, which they inherited from Hegel, already included materialism.⁵⁶ It's better to say, then, that Marx and Engels were materialists as soon as they were dialecticians—with thanks to Hegel, who said, as we recall in my first epigraph: “I do rate what is concrete higher than what is abstract, and an animality that develops into no more than a slime, higher than the starry host.”⁵⁷

Notes

Portions of this chapter originally appeared in Slovene in my essay “Dialektična filozofija: O fetišizmu in materializmu pri Heglu in Marxu” (“Dialectical Philosophy: On Fetishism and Materialism in Hegel and Marx”), trans. Samo Tomšič, *Problemi* 52, no. 3–4 (2014): 81–105. The remainder was presented as various lectures at University of Ljubljana (2013), Johns Hopkins University (2014), University of Tennessee–Knoxville (2014), Purdue University (2014), University of Pennsylvania (2015), and Duquesne University (2016).

1. See Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday (New York: Verso, 2012); and Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2014). I quite like Gajo Petrovič's formulation of this problem: “A definitive abolition of philosophy is imaginable only as a definitive victory of blind economic forces or political violence. Thus, it is unimaginable.” Petrovič,

Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century: A Yugoslav Philosopher Considers Karl Marx's Writings (New York: Anchor, 1967), 55. For Marx and Engels, "When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 48.

2. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 145.

3. Karl Marx, *The General Council of the First International*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress, 1962), 36. So much, then, for Marx's claim, made with Engels, that "philosophy and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as masturbation and sexual love." Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 103.

4. Hegel generously cites research from the experimental sciences but does not always name his adversaries. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature: Part Two of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 116–17, 120, 140, 167, 235–36, 253–54. Yet he acknowledges the differences between "conditioned" laboratory settings and "free" natural circumstances (116). On the four elements he writes: "the conception of the four Elements which has been general since the time of Empedocles . . . is nowadays rejected as a childish belief" (106). Hegel does notably use Empedoclean metaphors in the "Preface" to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (§26), but it is not accurate to say, with Nikolai Bukharin, that "in protest against atomic theory, chemical elements, and so on (he himself understood 'elements' in the spirit of the ancient Greeks, especially Empedocles, that is, as earth, water, air, and fire), and from fear of materialism he overstepped the mark, bending the stick, in the direction of the absolutization (that is, metaphysical restriction) of the whole, divorcing the whole from its parts." Nikolai Bukharin, *Philosophical Arabesques* (New York: Monthly Review, 2005), 203–4; see also 206.

5. "An intelligent idealism is closer to an intelligent materialism than is a stupid materialism." Vladimir Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 38 (Moscow: Progress, 1972), 276.

6. See Georgi Plekhanov, "For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel's Death," in *Selected Philosophical Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress, 1974), 421. For the thesis that "dialectical materialism is the only true philosophical inheritor of what Hegel designates as the speculative attitude of the thought towards objectivity," whereby "all other forms of materialism, including the late Althusser's 'materialism of the encounter,' scientific naturalism, and neo-Deleuzian 'New Materialism,' fail in this goal," see Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2014), 4.

7. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 465.

8. Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Peking: Foreign Languages, 1975), 23–24.

9. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 58.

10. From *The German Ideology*: "It shows that history . . . is . . . a material

result: a sum of productive forces, an historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor; a mass of productive forces, capital funds and conditions, which, on the one hand, is indeed modified by the new generation, but also on the other prescribes for it its conditions of life and gives it a definite development, a special character. It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances” (59).

11. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 45–46.

12. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nickolaus (New York: Penguin, 1993), 496.

13. *Ibid.*, 502.

14. *Ibid.*, 497.

15. *Ibid.*, 498.

16. *Ibid.*, 502.

17. *Ibid.*, 498.

18. Marx explains how “dissolution” amounts to “negation” (“This historic situation is thus first of all negated as a full property relation”) or that “negation” is another way of thinking about “dissolution”: “This is historic state No. I, which is negated in this relation or presupposed as historically dissolved.” It is as if Marx wants to incorporate his historical thesis into a general kind of Hegelianism, as befits the general thrust of the *Grundrisse*. And, of course, “historic state No. I” encounters historic state “No. II, which by its nature can exist only as antithesis to or, if one will, at the same time as complement of a modified form of the first—likewise negated [*negiert*] in the first formula of capital.” Marx, *Grundrisse*, 498–99, 499–500.

19. *Ibid.*, 503.

20. Karl Marx, “The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature,” in *The First Writings of Karl Marx*, ed. Paul M. Schafer (New York: Ig, 2006), 117.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 131.

23. *Ibid.*, 130.

24. What I say here identifies the strength of Hegel’s theory of the subject. Yet Marx says something similar to point out its weakness—namely, that in Hegel the subject always lapses back into its predicate and is simply a function of it. For Marx, the predicate is analogous to substance. See Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Law*,” in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1987).

25. Karl Marx, “Letter from Marx to His Father,” in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 18.

26. For example, elements are “determinations of the elemental totality which have an immediate existence as free, independent bodies”—they are, in short, “*physical Elements*,” the very compounds that constitute the world of appearance. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 105.

27. *Ibid.*, 115.

28. To put it differently, even if datedly: “the atom is itself a thought, and so the interpretation of matter as consisting of atoms is a metaphysical one.” G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1991), 156.

29. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 294.

30. *Ibid.*, 295.

31. *Ibid.*, 296.

32. *Ibid.*, 297.

33. “Here can be seen the true meaning of *powers* [*Potenzen*]. The non-organic Elements are powers opposed to what is individual, subjective—the non-organic destroys the organic.” *Ibid.*, 27.

34. *Ibid.*, 113.

35. *Ibid.*, 116.

36. Hegel makes a similar point in his *Philosophy of History*, stating: “But for spirit, the highest attainment is self-knowledge; an advance not only to the *intuition*, but to the *thought*—the clear conception of itself. This it must and is also destined to accomplish; but the accomplishment is at the same time its dissolution, and the rise of another spirit, another world-historical people, another epoch of Universal History. This transition and connection lead us to the connection of the whole—the idea of the World’s History as such”; and “change, while it imports dissolution, involves at the same time the rise of a *new life*—that while death is the issue of life, life is also the issue of death.” G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1956), 71–72, 72–73.

37. “If we now take these up in forms which are familiar to us, and say that we want to approach Nature as thinkers, there are, in the first place, other ways of approaching Nature which I will mention, not for the sake of completeness, but because we shall find in them the elements or moments which are requisite for a knowledge of the Idea and which individually reach our consciousness earlier in other *ways of considering Nature*.” Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 4.

38. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 198.

39. *Ibid.*, 200.

40. *Ibid.*, 198.

41. As Hegel claims, the element water is always more than a “*compositum*” of hydrogen and oxygen atoms, and thus cannot be divided into such units. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 117.

42. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 317. See also the following passage from the *Encyclopaedia Logic*: “In modern times, the atomistic view has become even more important in the *political* [realm] than in the physical [one]. According to this view, the will of the *single* [individuals] as such is the principle of the State; what produces the attraction is the particularity of needs [and] inclinations; and the universal, the State itself, is the external relationship of a contract” (155–56).

43. As Marx says, on the one side “the (potentially) free workers,” and on

the other side “capital (potentially).” When these two potentials become actuality by entering into a relation with one another, then you have a composition that contributes to the emergence or *appearance* of capitalism. You have a relation that is at once a compound: “at the same time . . . the development of exchange and of exchange value . . . brings with it both the dissolution of *labour’s relations of property in its* conditions of existence, in one respect, and at the same time the dissolution of *labour* which is itself *classed as one of the objective conditions of production.*” Marx, *Grundrisse*, 509.

44. *Ibid.*, 540.

45. “The dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 489. To be sure, there are plenty of other kinds of thinking in the *Manifesto*—talk of archaic forms “pushed into the background” (475) or “swept away” (476), talk of new forms springing forth (474)—all of which are a more inelegant way of conceptualizing a dialectical and materialist transition. Yet there remains in this tract a distinct indication that when material conditions reach a point of “dissolution,” then the proletariat steps forth to administer the coup de grâce (see 481; 472) and “abolish” all the “existing property relations,” specifically “the abolition of bourgeois property” or, emphatically, because it bears repeating, the “abolition of private property” (484). It is here that one can see that “dissolution” takes on a new transitivity, a new verbal, political, and material force in “abolition,” acts of destruction.

46. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 875.

47. *Ibid.*, 590.

48. *Ibid.*, 583, 616, 600, 635, 638, 617, 601, 578, 637.

49. Jason Edwards, “The Materialism of Historical Materialism,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 281.

50. See Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster, and Andrew Parke (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 58, 107. Rancière is closer to the mark in speaking of decomposition, “which pushes classes toward their death,” and bad decomposition, which “causes classes to fall short of themselves” (96).

51. Still, any talk of elements is going to get you into trouble in certain critical company, and has for a long time. You could be blamed for having investments in “scientism” in the manner of Ernst Mach, whom Vladimir Lenin couldn’t stand. Of the “elements,” for example, Lenin says: “Machism, which is a species of muddled idealism, befores the issue and side-tracks it by means of the futile verbal trick, ‘element.’” V. I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*, trans. Abraham Fineberg, in *V. I. Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 14, ed. Clemens Dutt (Moscow: Progress, 1962), 46.

52. Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 25 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 356.

53. Hegel, in his lord/bondsman dialectic, depicts the contemporary mate-

rial conditions of feudalism or *Grundherrschaft*, in which the struggle for recognition and possession transpires, as I show in *The Birth of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 65–85.

54. Compare Gramsci (whose points about Marx’s idealism I don’t accept, and whose ideas about Bukharin are incomplete): “That Marx should have introduced positivist elements into his work is hardly surprising, and it is easily explained: Marx was not a philosopher by profession, and even he had his off days.” Antonio Gramsci, *Pre-Prison Writings*, ed. Richard Bellamy, trans. Virginia Cox (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 77–78.

55. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 115.

56. Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 76. I need to elaborate here more generously on Engels’s meaning. In his letter to H. Starkenburg (dated January 25, 1894) he speaks of the “accidents” of history and a certain “zigzag” that nonetheless follows a course parallel to “economic development.” Is this the “swerve” of history? Perhaps more on point, Engels, in a letter to Joseph Bloch (dated September 21–22, 1890), devotes an entire paragraph to elemental materialism. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 768, 760.

57. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 297. Engels did get one thing right, however (he got many things right, of course, but this one in particular, which few today seem to acknowledge): he knew that German Idealism was responsible for saving the materialism of the Enlightenment.

“Think of it as ‘object ontology’ meets ‘*objet a* ontology.’ In this volume of superb essays, the new materialism associated with figures like Harman, Meillassoux, Bennett, and Bryant finds a Lacanian rejoinder well spoken for by Hegel’s famous line: ‘Not only as substance but also as subject!’ An invaluable exchange between two major currents of contemporary theory.” —Richard Boothby, author of *Freud as Philosopher: Metapsychology after Lacan*

Responding to the ongoing “objectal turn” in contemporary humanities and social sciences, the essays in *Subject Lessons* present a sustained case for the continued importance—indeed, the indispensability—of the category of the subject for the future of materialist thought. Approaching matters through the frame of Hegel and Lacan, the contributors to this volume, including the editors, as well as Andrew Cole, Mladen Dolar, Nathan Gorelick, Adrian Johnston, Todd McGowan, Bornha Radnik, Molly Anne Rothenberg, Kathryn Van Wert, and Alenka Zupančič—many of whom stand at the forefront of contemporary Hegel and Lacan scholarship—agree with neovitalist thinkers that material reality is ontologically incomplete, in a state of perpetual becoming, yet they maintain that this is the case not in spite of but, rather, *because of* the subject. Incorporating elements of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literary and cultural studies, *Subject Lessons* contests the movement to dismiss the subject, arguing that there can be no truly robust materialism without accounting for the little piece of the Real that is the subject.

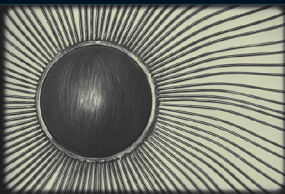


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