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TEMPORALIZING A MATERIALIST CONCEPT
OF HISTORY

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*This paper proceeds from the premise that time and temporality constitute a distinct philosophical problem for Marx and Engels's materialist concept of history in *The German Ideology*. It is thus necessary to "temporalize" this concept of history: to situate it in relation to the active production of a dynamic difference between the past, the present, and the future. After revisiting the philosophical dimensions of Marx's concepts of materialism, the human, and need, this article uncovers a temporality within the materialist concept of history that is irreducible to a historicist framework of linear, progressive time.*

There are a variety of reasons why the philosophical potential of *The German Ideology*¹ is far from being realized, but perhaps none stands out more than the fact that Marx and Engels provide no analysis of the relationship between time, temporality, and their materialist concept of history.² In other words, they do not examine the intrinsic temporalities of complex practices and phenomena such as the social production of the means of life, the creation of new needs, the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, the division of labour, class struggle, estrangement, and alienation. In Marx, "the human" is a fundamentally historical being, but how is it therefore a fundamentally temporal being? How would the temporaliza-

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, (ed.) C. J. Arthur and (tr.) S. W. Ryazanskaya (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1965). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as GI.

² Giorgio Agamben emphasizes this point in *Infancy & History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, (tr.) L. Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 91.

tion of this human reframe, qualify, and extend the natural and social aspects of Marx's historical anthropology?

There are two senses of "temporalization" at work in this paper, which are occasionally invoked simultaneously. The first denotes the "temporal reading" of the concept and of the practices, phenomena, etc. that the concept expresses. This is the sense in which temporalization renders explicit the concept's implicit temporality. The second correlates to existential temporalization in Heidegger and Sartre, such that the movement of existence "temporalizes itself" as a dynamic relationship between the past, the present, and the future. The relation between these two senses of temporalization is complex. For instance, the temporal reading is itself an occurrence of existential temporalization. But what I would like to emphasize is that it is not just the temporal reading but the concept *itself* that registers existential temporalization. Against Heidegger, the concept does not "derive" from an originary (existential) understanding, but rather always already incarnates this understanding. In Marx, after Hegel, the concept is always already incarnated in existence, precisely because existence must make itself adequate to the concept.³

Temporalization is inherently *critical*, because it upends how we (to use a Heideggerian expression) "initially and for the most part" comprehend action, activity, and the act themselves. The temporalization of the materialist concept of history thus destabilizes our understanding of Marx's concept of labour: economic activity defined as the social production of the means of life. In *The German Ideology*, labour is the ontological ground of the inseparable movements of *praxis* (self-transformative action by free humans) and *poiēsis* (the necessary production of objects for use). For Marx, this is the sense in which labour "historicizes." Yet in what sense does labour temporalize? This question is important, simply because any concept of history, materialist or otherwise, is unthinkable apart from the philosophy of time. But it is also important, because if—as I will argue—history is the meaning of ontology in Marx, such that a mode of production *is* ontology⁴, then temporality secures the philosophi-

³ As Hegel articulates it, "time is the concept itself, that *there is*." See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, (tr.) A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 487. For Hegel, this is the standpoint of absolute knowing [*absolute Wissen*], the pure movement of self-consciousness knowing itself as self-consciousness.

⁴ William Haver is correct when he states that "in Marx, the mode of production *is* ontology. There is nothing outside a mode of production," but it is important to stress that this position can only be sustained from the standpoint of the philosophy of time. See William Haver, "For a Communist Ontology," in *The*

cal status of ontology in Marx. “Mode of production” cannot be registered as an ontological category, nor can it be internalized within the philosophy of history, without systematically examining how labour temporalizes. This examination was never undertaken by Marx, and it is unclear, given the textual evidence, to what extent he saw his intervention into the philosophy of history in these terms. To be sure, Marx situates labour and temporality in conjunction with one another, although these efforts, most notably that of the concept of “labour-time” itself, are already subsumed by his analysis of capital: in this case, the quantifiable, durational time of abstract labour. There are highly suggestive passages in the *Grundrisse*, from Aristotelian positions (“since labour is motion, time is its natural measure”) to critical extensions of Hegel (“labour is the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time”⁵), but the fact remains that these passages are written from the standpoint of capital, a standpoint that cannot be conflated with history.

Many questions arise, but two in particular stand out. If labour constitutes the heart of Marx’s concept of materialism, does temporalization enable us to read materiality *as* temporality in Marx?⁶ And what are the philosophical—and political—implications of this reading? This remains to be seen. As Althusser puts it, we are far from having cleared up “the confusion that surrounds the concept of history.”⁷

A Practical Materialism: the *Theses on Feuerbach*

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the object [*Gegenstand*], actuality, sensuousness, is grasped only in the form of the *object* [Objekt] or of *intuition*, but not as *sensuous human activity, praxis*, not subjec-

Politics of Culture: Around the Work of Naoki Sakai, (ed.) R. Calichman and J. N. Kim (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 107.

⁵ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, (tr.) M. Nicolaus (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 205, 361.

⁶ Haver’s argument that “for Marx, materiality and temporality are the same thing” requires a systematic philosophical exposition which he does not provide (Haver, “For a Communist Ontology,” 114). Haver’s claim hinges on constructing a concept of materiality (*Materialität*) out of Marx’s dynamization of the concept of materialism (*Materialismus*) in the *Theses*.

⁷ Louis Althusser, “The Errors of Classical Economics: an Outline for a Concept of Historical Time,” in Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, (tr.) B. Brewster (London: Verso, 1997), 93.

tively. Hence, in opposition to materialism, the *active* side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know actual, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not grasp human activity itself as *objective* activity [gegenständliche *Tätigkeit*].... Hence he does not comprehend the significance of “revolutionary”, of “practical-critical” activity.⁸

The materialist concept of history must first be approached from the standpoint of Marx’s critical reconstruction of the concept of materialism. Written in Brussels during the spring of 1845, Marx’s eleven *Theses* reject the idea that a sensible object of appearance (*Gegenstand*), hence actuality and sensuousness, are captured only by intuition or only as an object of knowledge (*Objekt*). The first thesis (above) directly targets the “old” or substantialist (which is to say, matter-based) materialism, which is polemically assigned to Feuerbach, so as to create space for a “new” or practical (which is to say, human-based) materialism. At a basic level, the chief defect of existing materialism according to Marx is that it is pre-Kantian: it has no viable concept of the subject. At the same time, Marx critiques the character of Kant’s subjective constitution of objectivity upon which Feuerbach’s materialism relies. The *Theses* are a critical extension of the subject-object relation of modern epistemology as inaugurated by Kant: an extension, because they represent the first materialism of the subject within the Kantian tradition; critical, because they reject the sensuously passive and hence ideally active character of the subject-object relation in Kant’s transcendental logic. In his claim that objectivity, sensibility, and actuality are not comprehended subjectively by existing discourses of materialism, Marx not only dismisses the old metaphysics of matter in these discourses, but confronts the very dynamic of subjectivity in Kant. The transformation of a sensible object of appearance given to consciousness by intuition into an object of knowledge is a movement—from actual passivity to ideal activity—which defines the subject in Kant. It is a movement that authorizes the universality and necessity of the pure concepts of the understanding. To suggest, as Marx does, that objectivity, sensibility, and actuality are not grasped subjectively by all hitherto existing materialism is to suggest, against Kant, that the subject can be nothing else than sensuous human activity itself,

⁸ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *Early Writings*, (tr.) R. Livingstone and G. Benton (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 421–22; trans. mod.

nothing else than practice.⁹ As Balibar argues, in the wake of the *Theses*, “...the only true subject is the practical subject or the subject of practice or, better still, that *the subject is nothing other than practice* which has always already begun and continues indefinitely.”¹⁰

There are two outcomes that emerge from Marx’s practical materialism, one explicit and one implicit, each relying on the other and constituting a tension in relation to the other. First, as an explicit epistemological critique of an epistemological discourse, Marx’s *Theses* actively dialecticize the subject-object relation, such that sensuous human practice destabilizes any self-sufficient boundaries between the subject and the object, or between the “knower” and the “known.” Second, Marx’s speculative redefinition of the subject as practice yields an (implicit and underdetermined) claim on behalf of the ontological basis of this epistemological discourse. In this regard, the subject and the object, be they defined as the representative capacity of the human (*Gemüt*¹¹) and that which stands against it (*Gegenstand*), or dialectically rendered as sensuous activity on either pole, become in Marx epistemological derivations of an ontologically basic practice. In his transformation of a distinctly epistemological problematic, Marx enables the construction of a concept of practice which moves dialectically and unevenly between epistemology and ontology. If this concept grounds the subject-object relation of modern epistemology, the “is” and the “practice” within Balibar’s formula “the subject is practice” not only function as the copula and the

⁹ *Praxis* implicitly stands in as the meaning of “practice” in the *Theses*. Marx never outlines a concept of practice as epistemologically or ontologically distinct from *praxis*, in the *Theses* or elsewhere, but it is possible to suggest that the movement from an ontology of *praxis* to an ontology of production—that is, the movement from the *Theses* to *The German Ideology*—represents the development of a historical-ontological concept of practice within which the differentiation of practice from *praxis*, and the inseparability of *praxis* and *poiēsis*, is established. After *The German Ideology*, practice is not just ontologically basic to the subject-object relation of modern epistemology, as is offered by the *Theses*, but historically-ontologically basic to the *praxis-poiēsis* relation as well. It is Marx’s specification of practice as labour, as the social production of the means of life, that secures the removal of the separation between *praxis* and *poiēsis*.

¹⁰ Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, (tr.) C. Turner (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 25.

¹¹ *Gemüt* is a notoriously difficult concept to translate. In Kant, as elsewhere, it signifies the human mind, soul, consciousness, spirit, disposition, and body. What is clear is that *Gemüt* is a concept that exceeds the summation of its constituent parts, including the human and the understanding. “The representative capacity of the human” is a clunky placeholder, but preferable to reductive and exclusive translations such as “the mind.”

predicate of a philosophical proposition, but, after Hegel, represent dialectical moments of a speculative absolute identity which, unlike Hegel's, is not a substantial but rather, as we will now examine, a relational ontology.

Consider Marx's sixth thesis on Feuerbach:

Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the *human* essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inhabiting each single individual. In its actuality it is the ensemble [*das Ensemble*] of social relations. Feuerbach, who does not enter into a critique of this actual essence, is hence compelled: (1) to abstract from the historical process and to fix the religious sentiment as something by itself and to presuppose an abstract – *isolated* – human individual; (2) essence, therefore, can be comprehended only as “genus”, as an internal, mute generality which *naturally* unites the many individuals.¹²

The first thesis does not specify the meaning of “the human” in its redefinition of objective activity as sensuous human activity. The sixth thesis, on the other hand, directly confronts the question of human essence in a fashion that confirms the status of Marx's materialism as “new.” What grounds this confirmation, such that a new concept of the human and a new concept of essence emerge—and emerge, moreover, as conceptually dependent on one another—is the fact that Marx explicitly poses this question at the level of the actual.¹³ Marx's concept of the human is not new because this human is actual: to make this claim is to forget Marx's and Feuerbach's indebtedness to Hegel's position in the *Logic* that subjectivity resides in the concrete fullness of abstraction within consciousness. Rather, this is a conceptually new human because actuality is here unequivocally social. Actuality is, from the outset, an ensemble of social relations. Marx deliberately uses the French term “ensemble” to denote a fluid, open, and indeterminate unity that evades, contra Hegel, the “hierarchical completeness associated, philosophically, with the German terms for totality (*Totalität*) and whole (*Ganze*).”¹⁴ Far from introducing the human as a substance with inherent attributes, the sixth thesis implies that it is how such attributes are relationally

¹² Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” 423; trans. mod. Marx's claim that Feuerbach “resolves” the religious essence into the human essence is, to be fair, unfair to the complex relationship that Feuerbach establishes between theology and anthropology in *The Essence of Christianity*.

¹³ Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 28–29.

¹⁴ Peter Osborne, *How to Read Marx* (London: Granta Books, 2005), 30.

produced and distributed that constitutes its essential character. In this sense, the subject in Marx resides in the practical unity of the ensemble of social relations. The sixth thesis opens up, although it by no means explicitly presents, the possibility of a historical, or better, historicizing, subject, one that prioritizes social relations over their relata, and that remains abstract so long as abstraction is not philosophically and politically actualized within isolated human individuals. In this regard, the equivalence that Feuerbach establishes between genus-essence (*Gattungswesen*) and nature-essence in *The Essence of Christianity* is for Marx predicated on the abstraction from a sensuously passive, and hence unnatural, human, despite the fact that Feuerbach is concerned with the reappropriation of human nature as a collective social and political subject. Marx's critique of Feuerbach profoundly reworks the philosophical contours of essence. After Kant, it introduces the possibility of historicizing the relationship between the categories of genus-species-individual, and that between the categories of universal-particular-individual, relationships that predominately take the form of unilateral movement in one direction or the other (nominalism or realism). It is the spectre of such historicization—unrecognized by Marx in the *Theses*—that potentially reconfigures the predominant framework through which essence is thought, let alone lived.

The Human and its Nature

We now turn to *The German Ideology*. In “Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook,” the initial section where the contours of the materialist concept of history are outlined, Marx and Engels establish the “first premise of all human history” through three postulates:

The first premise of all human history is...the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature....

Humans can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of life [*Lebensmittel*], a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of life humans are indirectly producing their material life.

The way in which humans produce their means of life depends first of all on the nature of the means of life they actually find in existence and have to reproduce.

This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. Hence what individuals are depends on the material conditions of their production.¹⁵ (GI, 42; trans. mod.)

The German Ideology historicizes the materialism of the *Theses*. It also, as we will now consider, historicizes the philosophical anthropology of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844.¹⁶ The materialist concept of history in *The German Ideology* is predicated upon a materialist concept of anthropology: for Marx, the human is a kinetic, economic being, which means that it is the very activity of the social production of the means of life. At first glance, this concept of the human does not seem to represent much of a departure from the *1844 Manuscripts*. In these writings, “the human” and “the social” are already tightly interwoven concepts. The human has already been figured as both an individual in relation to other individuals *and* as that very relation itself. As Marx states: “the individual *is the social being*...the human’s individual and generic life are not *different*.” (EPM, 137; trans. mod.) In what sense, then, does *The German Ideology* critically rework the *1844 Manuscripts*?

We might begin by examining the concept of nature in relation to the “first premise of all human history.” The economic human does not make its own history alongside a self-sufficient nature, a nature in itself and as such. More radically, the first premise of all human history is the premise of history *per se*: the idea of a “history of nature” in isolation from the “existence of living human individuals” is, for Marx, nonsensical. As he puts it: “We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of humanity.

¹⁵ In addition to its colloquial meaning as victuals, *Lebensmittel* can be translated as “means of subsistence,” “means of existence,” and “means of life.” “Means of subsistence” is the predominant and weakest choice, as it exclusively emphasizes the reproduction of the physical existence of individuals, a dimension in which Marx’s concept of life is necessarily grounded, but which it also profoundly expands.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *The Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, (tr.) M. Mulligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as EPM.

The two sides are, however, *inseparable*; the history of nature and the history of humans are dependent on each other *so long as humankind exists*.¹⁷ And further: "...nature, the nature that preceded human history, is not by any means the nature in which Feuerbach lives, it is nature which today no longer exists anywhere...and which, therefore, does not exist for Feuerbach." (GI, 63) Should humankind no longer exist, that would not mean that other forms of organic and inorganic matter would also not exist. Marx's claim, rather, is that these other forms of matter would be neither historical nor natural: history and nature alike come to an end with the end of the human being. It is evident that, for Marx, the "existence of living human individuals" is inextricably tied to nature. But what is missing from the *1844 Manuscripts*, and what is highlighted at the start of *The German Ideology*, is (to rework the *1844 Manuscripts*) the existence of humans as natural-historical beings and nature as a human-historical means of life, which is to say a human-historical "matter,...object, and...instrument of...life activity." (EPM, 112; trans. mod.) *The German Ideology* clearly continues the emphasis the *1844 Manuscripts* place upon the human's metabolism with nature. At the same time, this shared emphasis is critically enriched in *The German Ideology*, as it is framed by a decisive historical logic that structures human universality *qua* the objectification of its labour. This introduces the possibility of actively historicizing nature as an ongoing extension of the human, rendering nature as the human's historical "inorganic body." The explicit association between labour, universality, and nature in the texts from 1844 finds its historical-ontological ground in *The German Ideology*. While the temporal consequences of this remain to be developed, we might suggest that the materialist concept of history can be figured as a continual crossing-over between the temporality of human activity and the temporality of nature, or, in the language of the initial premises of the materialist method, as an "intercourse [*Verkehr*]" between the inseparable temporalities of the natural-human and those of human-nature.

Marx's differentiation of the human from the animal originates with the idea that the human actively produces its means of life, while the existence of the animal does not exceed the means it discovers. For Marx, the animal does not produce its means of life, hence its reproduction is wholly dependent on the discovery of that which it cannot produce, and, thus, of that which it is not and cannot

¹⁷ This passage in *The German Ideology* is famous, in part, because it was crossed out in a final revision of the manuscript. This particular translation appears in Osborne, *How to Read Marx*, 38; my emphasis.

be. Marx's animal is ontologically static: it has no history, nor does it have temporality. It has no capacity to be more than itself. That which it was, that which it is, and that which it is not yet collapse into one another, rendering the three dimensions of human time meaningless in relation to the animal. To put it another way, the human produces its own temporality, while the animal does not. The only temporality to which the human and the animal alike are subject to is one particular temporality of nature: a cosmological time marked by a succession of instants, indifferent to the physiological life and death of all organisms.¹⁸ The animal is not a social, nor an economic, nor a historical being: "the animal does not enter into 'relations' with anything, it does not enter into any relation at all. For the animal, *its relation to others does not exist as a relation.*" (GI, 51; my emphasis) In some regards, there is precedence to this differentiation between the human and the animal in *The German Ideology*. The *1844 Manuscripts* dictate that the animal "produces one-sidedly...produces only itself," whereas the human "produces universally...reproduces the whole of nature." (EPM, 113) Here, as elsewhere, labour differentiates the human from the animal. As is well-known, Marx's philosophical anthropology before *The German Ideology* is rooted in a deeply Romantic, positive depiction of labour. Labour is the human's life-activity, its act of self-creation and self-actualization, its becoming-for-itself, the practice that constitutes its existence and through which its essence, the meaning of human being, is intelligible. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, the object of labour—both material and spiritual—is the objectification of the human as the living genus, the materialization of human activity in what Marx variously characterizes as "true," "inner," or "human" property.¹⁹ The object of labour is universal because it can be made, and used, by any social individual. Equally, the universality of genus-activity is actualized within each activity itself: each object that is produced by human labour becomes the representative of a particular species to which it belongs.²⁰ In other words, the human's existence as a genus-being (*Gattungswesen*), *qua* universal and consciously free being, bestows upon those objects

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 40.

¹⁹ As Andrew Chitty reminds us, Marx's concept of "true," "inner," or "human" property and its differentiation from "outer" or "private" property derives from Hegel's conception of property as the objectification of free will in *The Philosophy of Right* (§41) and its opposition to "possession" (§45). Possession is particular, whereas property is rational, and thus universal (§49). See Andrew Chitty, "The Early Marx on Needs," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 64 (Summer 1993): 23–31 here 30 n19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

that it creates (itself and other things) the status of species-being. For Marx, *this* concept of labour is what differentiates the human from the animal.

At the same time, the *1844 Manuscripts* do not thematize the premise that labour historicizes, that the production of the means of life is “a *definite* form of activity of...individuals, a *definite* form of expressing their life, a *definite* mode of life on their part.” (GI, 42; my emphasis) How exactly does *The German Ideology* establish the means of life as a historical dynamic? How is the concept of life in Marx a distinctly historical concept? That is, how does the production of the means of life—the economic—constitute the elementary content of Marx’s philosophy of history?

Need and the First Historical Act

At this point, it is instructive to consider three additional points made in a passage from *The German Ideology* which elaborate on the “first premise of all human history”:

[W]e must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that humans must be in a position to live in order to be able to “make history”. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the creation of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is a historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life....

The second point is that the satisfaction of the first need, the action of satisfying and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired, leads to new needs; and this creation of new needs is the first historical act....

The third relation which, from the very outset, enters into historical development, is that humans, who daily remake their own life, begin to make other humans, to reproduce their kind: the relation between man and woman, parents and children, the *family*....

These three aspects of social activity are not of course to be taken as three different stages, but just as three sides or, to make it clear to the Germans, three “moments”, which have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first humans, and which still assert themselves in history today. (GI, 48–50; trans. mod.)

The long passage quoted here introduces a transhistorical concept of life grounded in basic physiological needs: food, drink, habitation, clothing, and the like. Obviously, the need to sustain human life at its most basic level never disappears, no matter how sophisticated economic activity becomes. The new needs that are created via the satisfaction of these first needs never escape the domain of the basic sustenance of the human, even as they are not readily identifiable as basic components of human life. In other words, new needs always bear some relation to human survival: the social production of the means of life can never be disassociated from the social production of the means of subsistence, even as the expression of life exceeds, as Marx and Engels put it in the earlier passage, “the reproduction of the physical existence of...individuals.” In short, *The German Ideology* operates with a radically expansive concept of subsistence registered by the concept of life. But a difficulty arises in these passages: the production of the means of life includes two “first historical acts.” How do we address this apparent tension?

The answer to this begins with the multifaceted evolution of the concept of need (*Bedürfnis*) in the *1844 Manuscripts*. In this text, the social human is specified by the production and consumption of social objects. For Marx, the human’s orientation to these objects is one of appropriation: it is an appropriation of the objectification of the human’s life-activity, and thus constitutes a return of the human to itself as a totality, as a “*manifestation of...human reality*.” (EPM, 139) As the bearers of the human’s essential powers, objects affirm, and indeed give pleasure, to human sensuousness. Against the *Theses*, an orthodox meaning of sensuousness (via Hegel and Feuerbach) is invoked here, drawing on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and pointing to the human as an irretrievably receptive, passive, and suffering being. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, as an objective, sensuous being, the human is not just a suffering (*leidendes*) but also a passionate (*leidenschaftliches*) being, insofar as it feels its self-manifestation *qua* labour as an affirmation of its essence. These feelings are not mere matters of cognition, but, for Marx, ontologically basic categories, determinations of the whole being of the human. The interchange of human activities and products mediates and cultivates human sensuousness: “...not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses – the practical senses (will, love, etc.) – in a word, *human sense* – the human nature of the senses – comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of *humanized nature*.” (EPM, 141) This expansion of the meaning of the senses goes hand-in-hand with Marx’s broadening of the philosophical scope of the object, labour, and nature. The force behind this expansion, the conceptual interdependence be-

tween the object, labour, nature, and the senses, and thus the essential wealth of human being, is sociality itself: “the *social* character is the general character of the whole movement.” (EPM, 137)

In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx’s concept of need is the fullest and most developed expression of this expansive human: “The *wealthy* human is simultaneously the human *in-need-of* a totality of human life-expression; it is the human in whom its own realization exists as inner necessity, as *need*.” (EPM, 144; trans. mod.) To be “in-need-of a totality of human life-expression” is to be in-need-of the sheer diversity and refinement of the objectification of consciously free human life-activity as genus-activity. It is, as Andrew Chitty states, the fact that “human beings express themselves through the creation of universal objects, and so the need for human life-expression is the need to create such objects for other human beings, i.e. to create objects that can in principle satisfy the needs of any human being...”²¹—and we might add: for human beings to *consume* universal objects created by other human beings. In this regard, human needs are defined by particular individuals’ needs for one another, the need to be social in the sense of the interchange of individuals’ activities and products. But there is another dimension to need here as well. Bearing in mind that Marx’s concept of the human is both an individual already in relation to other individuals and *that very relation itself*, the totality of human life-expression which the human needs is not reducible to an aggregate production and consumption of universal objects, but is also the very interdependency between objectification (human property), essential activity (labour) and cultivated pleasure (sensuousness) itself. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, the human’s need to be a social relation is at the same time the source of its individuation, without which the unencumbered, consciously free refinement and diversification of needs cannot proceed. When, at a much later date, Marx contends that in the future past of communism “...labour has become not only the means of life but *life’s first need...*,”²² this is a speculative call for an indissociable social and individual life, where the creation of new needs is the recreation of the human as an equally wealthy social relation and particular individual. For Marx, it is because of need that there are individuals. Need constitutes the ontological basis of the sociality of human individuation.

²¹ Chitty, “The Early Marx on Needs,” 26.

²² Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (ed. R. C. Tucker, 2nd edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1978), 531; trans. mod.; my emphasis.

As with the concept of nature and the differentiation of the human from the animal, *The German Ideology* is in some respects continuous with this concept of need in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Need is the ontological meaning of life in both texts. While *The German Ideology* is not premised on an affirmation of life or a confirmation of an authentic human-nature (a discourse that pervades the *1844 Manuscripts*), it nonetheless remains squarely within the bounds of the Romantic expression of the ways and means of life. Yet, in nearly every other respect, Marx's subsumption of need under a historical logic constitutes a decisive break with the *1844 Manuscripts* in ways far more consequential than the analogous historicization of concepts such as nature and the animal. Need has not just become historicized—structured by a historical logic—but, more importantly, structures that very logic itself. The concept of need in *The German Ideology* is a crucial dimension of the very meaning of historicization: insofar as labour historicizes, this cannot be understood apart from the production of the means to satisfy existing needs and the creation of new needs. Put differently, it is *The German Ideology* that enables labour to be registered as an economic and historical concept, and history to be irretrievably tied to subsistence-level needs. When Marx and Engels speak of the material production of life, “both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation” (GI, 50), they are explicitly referencing the basic need of the human (broadly understood) to subsist. This is a radical focussing and concretizing of the *1844 Manuscripts*, whereby the “totality of human life-expression” becomes permanently connected and ultimately reducible to material life itself. However, this is not necessarily a limitation of the *1844 Manuscripts*. There is no reason to believe in the wake of *The German Ideology* that the human cannot be rendered in-need-of this totality, but only that this totality is permanently grounded in the recognition that the human must be in a position to live. This is the reason why Marx and Engels bemoan the fact that

In the whole conception of history up to the present this actual basis of history has either been totally neglected or else considered as a minor matter quite irrelevant to the course of history. History, therefore, must always be written according to an extraneous standard: the actual production of life seems to be primeval history, while the truly historical appears to be separated from ordinary life, something extra-superterrestrial [*Extra-Überweltliche*]. With this the relation of humans to nature is excluded from history and hence the antithesis of nature and history is created. (GI, 59; trans. mod.)

The philosophy of history which Marx and Engels criticize in this passage is premised on a fetishized conception—and a dehistoricizing temporality—of nature, which becomes the exclusive domain of the actual production of life, and which denies, as previously mentioned, humans as natural-historical beings and nature as a human-historical means of life.

This brings us to the third moment of history, the place occupied by the biological reproduction of the human—the propagation of the human as a living species—in relation to the materialist concept of history more generally. On the one hand, this reproduction is a philosophical problem for Marx, because the social materialism begun in the *Theses* and historicized in *The German Ideology* is indifferent to the matter of this reproduction, which is to say—above all else—the procreative capacities of the human body. On the other hand, the meaning of historicization in *The German Ideology* is the simultaneous acknowledgement and perpetuation of this indifference. In *The German Ideology*, social activity is historical activity precisely because the concept of life is grounded in the essential physiological and physical needs of living human beings and *not* in the genesis of human life as such. Need and the human—the two fundamental articulations of the social in Marx—provide the biological genesis of life with its historical intelligibility. Marx and Engels clearly recognize the biological reproduction of human beings, but this third moment, from the very outset, gives rise to a relational ontology. While biological reproduction and the relations that govern this reproduction cannot be conflated with one another, it is the social form—not the content—of this reproduction that renders it historical. This is a basic tenet of the philosophy of history in Marx: the production of the means of life (which necessarily includes “fresh life” in procreation) is rendered historical by the social relations that structure this production. In the case of biological reproduction, Marx and Engels specify these relations as the relations between man and woman, parents and children, the family, and so on, relations that raise the question of whether the economic is a sexed ontological category of the human, and hence a sexed category of history. The philosophical and political significance of this question is not realized by the obvious answer—the economic is undeniably a sexed category in Marx—but rather by the formation of a materialist feminism made possible by this answer. In *The German Ideology*, there is no evidence that Marx and Engels think sex as anything else than biologically given (individual human bodies as sexed prior to their socialization), a testament—rich with irony—to the remarkable ideological power of the traditional conception of sex, which, suffice

to say, excises nature from history and impoverishes the social core of Marx's concept of the human. From the standpoint of the philosophy of sex, *The German Ideology* is complicit in its own critique of self-sufficient philosophy, as being blind to "the practical activity, the practical process of the development of humans." (GI, 48; trans. mod.) Yet it is also necessary to recognize that *The German Ideology* enables a critical theory of sex: not as a fetishized nature but as a social relation that originates the production of the means of life and opens up the complex relationship between materialism and oppression.²³

An Incipient Historical Temporality

It is difficult to overstate how important the concept of *means* (*Mittel*) is to the materialist concept of history. This importance emerges with the first of the two first historical acts: the creation of the means to satisfy existing needs (not the satisfaction of those needs as such). This emphasis on means returns us to the apparent tension between the two first historical acts that constitute history. The second first historical act, the creation of new needs, must now be examined in relation to the first first historical act, the creation of the means to satisfy existing needs. The issue here is not the content of new needs, but the way in which these needs—*qua* new—constitute a historical logic more generally. Marx and Engels are not confusing matters by identifying two first historical acts, but in fact understand the creation of the means to satisfy existing needs and the creation of new needs as two different expressions of one and the same historical act.²⁴ In this regard, "means" and "the new" are conceptually indissociable. The creation of the means of life, not life *per se*, unites existing and new needs, while not collapsing the difference between the domain of the existing and that of the new. What follows from this is an unmistakable—if underdeveloped—historical logic. A dynamic and open first historical act gives rise to a concept of history that is implicitly alien to a fixed opposition between the existing and the

²³ Christine Delphy's work is the crucial point of departure here. See, in particular, Christine Delphy, "A Materialist Feminism is Possible," (tr.) D. Leonard, *Feminist Review*, no. 4 (1980): 79–105.

²⁴ As Peter Osborne puts it, "...there is only one act at issue here. The 'production of the means to satisfy existing needs' and the 'creation of new needs' refer to two aspects of the same act, since the production of new means to satisfy existing needs creates a (hitherto non-existent) need for these means" (Osborne, *How to Read Marx*, 41).

new. Consequently, the notion of historical change becomes destabilized. The difference and the relationship established between one historical act and another, demarcating the end of one historical act and the beginning of another, becomes unsettled in the sense that it is impossible to claim that there is such a thing as “after” the social production of the means of life. This impossibility is dictated by the concept of means, which, like Marx’s concept of a “force of production,” denotes the ongoing objectification of a social relation orientated towards an end, in fact *the* end (in its teleological, not chronological, register), which is nothing else than life itself. The materialist concept of history is structured by a dialectic between the existing and the new, which is a permanently open dialectic, because the end of the first historical act (in its chronological, not teleological, register) is, strictly speaking, unintelligible. Hence the question arises: is there a historical temporality to be disinterred from this?

Marx and Engels never offer a temporal reading of the first historical act, but it is worthwhile to make two broad observations. First, a dialectical interplay between the present and the past is contained within the premise that the new resides within the means of satisfying existing needs. The domain of the past, or existing needs, all the way down to the primal need to eat, drink, and sleep, can never be thought apart from the means to satisfy such needs. Nor, for that matter, is the domain of the present, the creation of these means, intelligible in isolation from the content of what they satisfy. There is no chronological succession here: one moment (the existence of a need) is not subsequently followed by another (the creation of the means to satisfy this need). Rather, the domain of the present *is* the dialectic between the creation of the means to satisfy existing needs and the creation of new needs. In Marx, the present is a dialectic unto itself, and it actively creates the past as an existing need. Put differently, the relationship between the present and the past is a dialectical relationship between a dialectical present and a non-dialectical past. This interplay between the present and the past clearly prioritizes the present over the past, because the creation of the means of life is the creation of both new *and* existing needs. Existing needs and the creation of the means to satisfy them may codetermine one another, but this relationship would be static—it would have no temporality—were it not for these means. In Marx, the priority of the historical present—the priority of the actual—is indebted to the concept of means.

This leads to a second observation. The future of the first historical act gives direction to the dialectic of the present and the past. The future by no means predetermines this dialectic, but it does guide

the present's ongoing creation and negation of the existence of the past, which is to say the ongoing expansion and satisfaction of subsistence-level needs within the present. Yet—quite crucially—the future does not lie in waiting. The domain of the future is *not* the waiting overcoming of the present in the same way that the present actually overcomes the past. It is *not* the speculative formal repetition of an actual dialectic played out between the present and the past. To take this position would be to relegate the future, and with it the temporality of the first historical act more generally, to a historicist framework wherein the future becomes a moment which has yet to arrive. Rather, the future is wholly immanent to the present's transcendence of the past. Or better: the present's dialectical transcendence of the past *is* the past's future (the present *is* the future of the past). In order to establish the way in which the future is constitutive of the first historical act, it is useful to critically engage the phenomenological ontology of Dasein in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, namely the ontological priority that Heidegger grants to the future with his assertion that “temporality temporalizes itself originarily out of the future.”²⁵ This priority does not undercut the ontological priority which Marx grants to the present. Nothing prevents Heidegger's future from being adapted to Marx's present, whereby the future of the first historical act is neither that which is yet to occur, nor that which is yet to materialize, but, following Heidegger, an existential understanding ability-to-be (*Seinkönnen*)—a projective capacity—for the sake of which any act exists.²⁶ This future—which equally structures Sartre's account of temporalization in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*—is an ordinary future of the means-end relationship, and it is at the crux of the dialectic between the

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (tr.) J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper Collins, 1962), 380; trans. mod.

²⁶ See *ibid.*, 385. At the heart of *Being and Time* is a reconstruction of the teleological structure of the act, and at the heart of this is an analysis of the finitude (*Endlichkeit*) that in every case limits Dasein's ability-to-be. For Heidegger, finitude does not give temporality meaning because Dasein will “die one day.” Finitude is not the number of years, months, weeks, days, that we have left to live, but our existential limit as kinetic entities, a limit which is already always there as the origin of all possible projection. This analysis could be aligned with Marx's analysis of the commodification of labour-power, but only on the condition that the relationship between ordinary temporality and the ordinary conception of time is dialecticized, that is, historicized. In short, labour-time *has* value because the worker will die one day, but this quantifiable time based in this ordinary conception of death is dialectically tied to an unquantifiable temporality based in the worker's fundamentally limited capacity to act (his existential being-towards-death).

present and the past. Like Sartre's—but unlike Heidegger's—this future is thus ontologically grounded by need, even while it guides the creation of need. And this future is a condition of thinking history as entirely open, not just in the sense that it cannot be predicted, but so too in the sense that it provides the standpoint from which the totalization of history might be grasped as a unification the unity of which *is* the process of its differentiation.²⁷

The temporality of the first historical act must, I contend, be secured before any rightful pleas can be made to free the materialist concept of history from (to invoke Benjamin) the straightjacket of historicism, from the suffocating confines of homogenous, empty time. So-called “historical materialism” (a term never used by Marx himself) has for too long suffered, at the hands of Marxists and non-Marxists alike, from what Harry Harootunian aptly describes as the “narrative and continuist story line that move[s] like a fast-moving express train for a predetermined destination.”²⁸ Marx does not evade this problem. In *The German Ideology* and elsewhere, he frequently relies on a historicist conception of historical time, because he implicitly treats historical time as the medium in which change occurs within and between modes of production. He does not treat historical time as constituted by different modes of production themselves. Philosophically and politically speaking, this task is crucial, if we are to believe Lukács's claim (as I do) that “Historical Materialism...means the *self-knowledge of capitalist society*.”²⁹

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²⁷ For Sartre, this unification grounds the historicizing relationship of dependence between totalization and temporalization: temporalization *is* the production of the very difference between the past, the present, and the future.

²⁸ Harry Harootunian, “Historical Materialism's Task in an ‘Age of Globalization,’” *Radical History Review*, no. 79 (2001): 95–98, here, 95.

²⁹ Georg Lukács, “The Changing Function of Historical Materialism,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, (tr.) R. Livingstone (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1972), 229.