PHILOSOPHICAL MATERIALISM
OR THE MATERIALIST
CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

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Introduction

'Marxism is a materialism'. This idea has become commonplace. Usually, it amounts to placing Marx and Marxism inside a philosophical tradition; one whose roots lie in the atomistic philosophies of Democritus and Epicurus. Much recent 'Marxist' materialism imitates or reproduces many of the ideas of the 18th-century French 'Encyclopaedists'. Lenin, in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, vindicates D'Holbach; recent Marxists defend Lenin.

In my view, the spirit of Marx's writings on this subject is lost by placing him inside any kind of philosophical tradition, be it 'reductive', 'reflective' or even 'dialectical'. On the contrary, his materialism is an empirical theory about human beings in history. This is not, however, to say that it cannot be justified. Irony is the view, expressed by a number of Marxists recently, that although Marx's materialism is an epistemology in so far as it is about what we know and how we know it, it does not need justifying. In this respect, it is supposed to be absolutely unlike the traditional 'idealist' theories, which set out to justify knowledge claims. These Marxists claim (1) that the idealist's question - the request for a justification of knowledge - cannot be answered, or that it is a pseudo-question. But the idealist believes his problem to be an important one. To rule him (2) out of court in this way is tantamount to an admission that anyone who is an idealist is just not worth bothering about. At the very least this is odd, for one would have supposed that the idealists were the very people the materialist would be trying to convince. A physicist of an Einsteinian frame of mind is more interested in gaining the support of a Newtonian physicist than that of a Pre-Raphaelite painter. Similarly a materialist, one would have supposed, is more concerned to convert an idealist than he is to convert a shoemaker.

I propose, in the ensuing discussion, to concentrate on two kinds of philosophical materialism: philosophical 'realism' and 'reductive' materialism. There is a view in the history of Marxism according to which Marx broke new ground in the history of philosophical materialism in introducing a 'dialectical materialist' theory which differs from both. But this is becoming a less influential view, and I do not propose to discuss it here.

This is how I shall proceed. I shall outline the basic tenets of traditional philosophical materialism via what I propose to call the '17th/18th century debate'. There will follow a section on Althusser's 'Materialism and dialectical materialism'. Althusser thinks that Lenin's Materialism and Empirio-Criticism represented a break with previous philosophical categories. I don't think it did. I shall then give some reasons for not placing Marx and Marxism within the philosophical materialist tradition. Finally, I shall turn to Marx's materialism.

'17th and 18th Century Philosophical Materialism'

I propose to explain some of the views of the 'philosophical materialist' by looking at some of the 17th and 18th century representatives of the tradition. These centuries produced several 'paradigmatic' individuals by way of 'idealists' and 'materialists', and the various philosophical materialist theories are present. Historical accuracy is not my prime concern. Instead, my aim is to present a quasi-debate between some idealists and some materialists. I shall look first of all at Descartes and Hume as the idealists; D'Holbach and Diderot will be the materialists. I intend briefly to explain the aims and conclusions of the representatives of the two viewpoints, to see to what extent the materialist can be construed as having 'answered' the idealist, and then to trace the strands of the tradition in the work of Marxists.

One of the central aims of the idealist was to justify knowledge of the external world. Though they have been placed on opposite sides of one fence, Descartes and Hume shared a belief in the importance of justifying knowledge. Both saw that it is possible to doubt the evidence of the senses. Each one admitted that we might wake up one morning and find the universe altered beyond recognition. Both saw certainty as the hallmark of knowledge. And, although their respective views concerning what is known differ in some ways, for both, what is known depends for its existence upon a mind. Descartes believed that he knew with certainty what he thought; while Hume claimed that he knew the contents of his mind, in the form of 'impressions' and 'ideas'. In both cases, the starting point of knowledge is something mental - that I am thinking, or that I have 'perceptions'.

The belief in the existence of the external world is one which has to be justified - Descartes examined the question: 'whether material things exist' (p109 in Descartes' Writings, eds. P. Geach and E. Anscombe) and Hume asked: 'what causes induce us


2 Throughout the paper, 'him' should be taken to include 'her'.
to believe in the existence of body?' (p157 - Treatise concerning Human Nature, Book I, Section II, Clarendon Press). The external world is problematic - for Descartes, its existence is problematic, and for Hume, it is our belief in it which is open to question.

It is one small step from the view that the existence of the external world is problematic, to the conclusion that there is no world existing independently of minds. And Berkeley took this step. In his Principles of Human Knowledge, he argued that from Locke's list of existents: minds, the 'ideas' in minds, and physical things, the last must be deleted. Thus we arrive at a form of idealism according to which everything that exists depends for its existence upon a mind. There are two views wrapped up here: (i) that everything we know about is dependent upon a mind - there is no knowable mind-independent reality; and (ii) that all there is is either identical with a mind or dependent for its existence upon a mind (See Of The Principles of Human Knowledge, Clarendon Press). Berkeley, then, is an idealist both in the epistemological and in the ontological sense, whereas Descartes is an ontological dualist.

The 18th-century materialist response to these views is that the idealist conclusion denies what natural science tells us: that the world is made up of matter and motion, and nothing but these things. According to D'Holbach 'man is a being purely physical' (p2 The System of Nature, London, 1839). 'his ideas, his will, his actions are the necessary effects of those qualities infused in him by nature, and of those circumstances in which she has placed him', (ibid, p2). D'Holbach and Diderot argued that human beings and other animals are just like inert matter, except that the parts are organised differently. Diderot: 'From inert matter, organised in a certain way, and impregnated with other inert matter, and given heat and motion, there results the faculty of sensation, life, memory, consciousness, passion and thought.' (p178, A Conversation between D'Alembert and Diderot: in 18th-century Philosophy, ed. Lewis White Beck, The Free Press, New York, 1966). And D'Holbach: 'Man, like all the beings in nature, experiences the impulse of attraction and repulsion; the motion excited in him differing from that of other beings, only because it is not concealed, and frequently so hidden, that neither the causes which incite it, nor their mode of action, are known.' (op.cit., p30)

The Encyclopaedists argued that there is no God. According to D'Holbach, all proofs of the existence of god must rest upon 'the false principle, that matter is not self-existent, that, by its nature it is an impossibility to move itself' (op.cit., p357). The word 'spirit' is 'a word that means that (he) is ignorant of its essence' (op.cit., p357). The idea of god is as impossible as an effect without a cause. The universe is the cause of itself, and everything that happens in it is subject to fixed laws.

The Encyclopaedists' prime concern was to vindicate what they saw to be the conclusions of natural science. If the idealists' quest for a justification of the existence of the external world led them to a conclusion that was incompatible with the views of science, then the materialist view was so much the worse for the idealists' problem.

In fact, then, the Encyclopaedists' 'response' to the idealist is no response at all. It is not an answer which the idealist might come to accept. It is simply a rejection of the idealists' problem.

Eighteenth-century 'reductive' materialism has been taken up by Marxists and particularly by Lenin (in Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, Lawrence & Wishart, 1948). Like the Encyclopaedists, Lenin effectively denies the importance of the idealists' problem. According to him, idealism is contrary to our practice; we couldn't act in the world if it were correct. Idealism is violated by the assumption of the existence of other living beings. On the other hand, materialism is the theory of 'habit, of commonsense' (ibid, p35). Natural science 'instinctively adheres to a materialist theory of knowledge' (ibid, p37). Materialism is the view that 'matter is primary and regards consciousness, thought, sensation as secondary' (ibid, p38).

There is another form of materialism which has been taken up by Marxists. This form appears in the 17th/18th century debate not so much with the French materialists but in the ideas of a philosopher who, in other respects, might fall in the idealists' camp. It appears earlier on in the 17th century, in Locke, and in others associated with the Royal Society in England. This strand contains an epistemological and ontological aspect. By the latter, the object of knowledge exists independently of the subject - of the subject's thought and activity - and is reflected in the subject's mind. In Locke, this view appeared as the view that the 'ideas' of Primary Qualities, which are caused in us by the action of bodies in our organs, 'resemble' the qualities. There is a set of properties of a substance which exist independently of the subject, and which are simply reflected in the subject's mind. Each idea has its corresponding, resembling cause (see J. Locke, Essay concerning Human Understanding, Book II, Chapters I, VII and VIII).

This strand of the 17th and 18th century philosophico-materialist viewpoint has been taken up by recent Marxists (by D. Ruben and by Timpanaro). Timpanaro tells us: 'by materialism, we understand above all, the priority of nature over mind' (On Materialism, p34, NLB, 1970). And Ruben quotes

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Lenin as giving the sense he wants to give to the term 'materialism': 'the fundamental premise of materialism is the recognition of the external world, of the existence of things outside and independent of our mind' (p. 4, Marxism and Materialism, Harvester Press, 1977).

In a moment, I shall argue against placing Marx and Marxism within any of these parts of the philosophical materialist tradition. But first I should like to look at Althusser.

Althusser and 'Lenin and Philosophy'

According to the Althusser of Lenin and Philosophy, Lenin, in Materialism & Empirio-Criticism, broke with previous conceptions of philosophy. Althusser foists his own theoretical position precariously upon Lenin: Lenin is supposed to have provided a philosophy in Materialism, a philosophy which arrives after the science (in this case, historical materialism) 'ha(s) already lived the time of a long day' (p. 41, Lenin & Philosophy & other Essays, NLB, 1971). He did this, according to Althusser, despite the fact that really he was born too soon to have done it. He did it, Althusser tells us, by breaking with the terms of reference of previous conceptions of philosophy: 'Lenin takes up anti-Empiricist positions precisely in the field of an empiricist reference problematic' (ibid, p. 52).

But Althusser, here, is dressing up Lenin in his own clothes. And we are given no reason to believe that they fit. Lenin is supposed to have treated philosophy differently from the way it had previously been viewed. But, where is this to be found in Lenin? Why should we see Materialism and Empirio-Criticism in that light? Althusser gives us no reasons why we should read Materialism and Empirio-Criticism as he tells us to. And to tell us, as he does, that we must 'read between the lines' in order to find it all, is simply an evasion.

Althusser, then, gives us no reasons why we should regard Lenin as having 'broken with previous conceptions of philosophy'. And there are many reasons why we should not so regard him. His account of materialism, and his reasons for wanting to uphold a materialist philosophy, place him well within the terms of reference of previous debates on the subject.

But there are reasons why we should regard Marx's materialism as being different from philosophical materialism.

Reasons Why Marx's Materialism Should Not Be Seen As Philosophical Materialism

There are plenty of passages throughout the corpus of Marx's writings which suggest that the materialism with which he is sympathetic is not any version of philosophical materialism, but is something quite different. The work which perhaps might best be cited as providing evidence in favour of his holding some philosophical materialist theory - the Holy Family - gives plenty of evidence to the contrary. That work was written in Paris in 1844, jointly with Engels, and the two of them already had the idea of the 'mode of production' as playing a central role in the development of society. The conception of materialism to which Marx is sympathetic, in that work, is one which 'coincides with humanism' (3). And, in the Foreword, we read: 'Real humanism has no more dangerous enemy in Germany than spiritualism or speculative idealism which substitutes 'self-consciousness' or the 'spirit' for the real individual man' (my italics).

Materialism which 'coincides with humanism' is represented by French and English socialism and communism (4). These remarks suggest, then, that only a materialism which 'coincides with humanism' is one of which Marx approves. A full analysis of the concept 'humanism' lies outside the scope of this paper; however, it is probable that Marx, in keeping with his contemporaries, meant it to have to do with human self-perfection and self-development. If he did, then it is a term which is describing peculiarly human qualities, qualities which would be eliminated if they were reduced a la reductive materialism. And in at least one sense of 'coincide', humanism does not coincide with 'reflective materialism', for the latter is about what there is, quite generally, while the former is specifically about human beings. In a puzzling remark in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), Marx described 'humanism' as 'constituting the unifying truth of both [idealism and materialism]' (p. 81). Neither of the above two forms of materialism could do this. And in a work which is also critical of philosophy: (Feuerbach) provided the proof that philosophy is nothing else but religion brought into thought and expanded by thought, hence equally to be condemned as another form and manner of existence of the estrangement of the essence of man' (ibid, p. 72). Thus it is unlikely that the unifying truth of materialism and idealism will be another philosophical theory.

Marx expresses his distaste for some of the concerns of both reflective and reductive materialism in the section of the Holy Family called 'The Speculative Circular Motion of Absolute Criticism and the Philosophy of Self-Consciousness'. In criticism of Spinoza's substance, he says: 'It is 'metaphysically travestied nature severed from man' (p. 86, The Holy Family, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1956). And he is sceptical of 'critical criticism' for having a 'respect for natural science' if it 'excludes from the historical movement the theoretical and practical relations of man to nature, natural science and industry' (ibid, p. 201). Throughout the Holy Family, then, the thrust of Marx's remarks about materialism is towards a concern with human beings and their productive activity. There is no sympathetic discussion of any variant of philosophical materialism (5). Ruben quotes a passage in Chapter 5 of the Holy Family as giving support to his claim that Marx was a 'reflective materialist'. The passage reads as follows: 'If from real apples, pears,
strawberries, almonds I form the general notion fruit, and if I go further and imagine that my abstract notion, the fruit... exists as an independent essence of the pear, the apple, etc., I declare therewith - speculatively expressed - the fruit to be the 'substance' of the pear, the apple, the almond etc... I then pronounce the apple, pear and almond to be merely existing modes of the fruit... But one can interpret this passage more readily, not as he does, as an attack on the Hegelian doctrine which involved ascribing to the ability to create all of nature, but as a criticism of the view that what is essential to particular things - in other words, speculatively expressed - the fruit to thought is the ability to create all of nature, but as a stract notion, the fruit particular things is their being semblances of an essence of the pear, the apple, etc. I declare strawberries, almonds I form the general notion fruit, and if I go further and imagine that my abstract notion, the fruit - is their 'real being', their real 'natural being'.

In support of the view that Marx's materialism is different from both sorts of philosophical materialism, there is the 1st thesis on Feuerbach (7). It is surely quite clear that one target here is reductive materialism. The reductive materialist would want to translate 'human sensuous activity' into some property of matter, or into a relation between bits of matter. And, while it is not so obvious that Marx is hostile towards reflective materialism per se, he is clearly expressing criticism of any version of such materialism which excludes 'sensuous human activity' from the range of knowable objects. And surely he is doing more than simply giving a reflectionist view here (6), for he emphasises that 'sensuous human activity' in particular is the 'object' upon which he wants to concentrate. It is not at all a claim about the relation between 'subject' and 'object', rather it tells us that 'human activity' is a proper object of study. In other words, the Thesis is not giving an epistemological view at all.

Elsewhere in his writings, Marx tends not to use the noun 'materialism', he favours the adjectives 'material' and 'materialist'. He refers to the 'material conditions under which they live' (31, German Ideology, Lawrence & Wishart), 'material relations' (Marx to Anna Khovin, Selected Works, p690), 'material productive forces' and 'material life' (31, German Ideology, and p368 Critique of Political Economy in Selected Works), and to 'the materialist conception' (of history) p369, Critique of Political Economy, Selected Works). In these connections, he is not discussing materialism as a philosophical theory, but is alluding to his materialist conception of history. The latter is neither an ontological nor an epistemological theory, but is an empirical theory about human beings in history.

As well as Marx's views on 'materialism', there are his views on philosophy. I have already quoted once from the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts. In that work, too, in the course of criticizing Hegel, Marx says: 'The philosophic mind is nothing but the estranged mind of the world thinking within its self estrangement (p174 EPM). And in the Introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, his view is that criticism of the 'political' conclusions of the Hegelian philosophy requires the abolition of philosophy (see pp47-49 in On Religion). There is also the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, which, though it is not expressing quite such a strong view as the passage just quoted, is critical of the role of philosophy: 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it' (p30 in Selected Works).

Apart from Marx's own views on the subject, there is another weak reason why Marx's materialism should not be seen to be equivalent to philosophical materialism. There is a tendency, amongst those who place Marx inside the philosophical materialist tradition, to forgo justifying the theory. Several Marxists, recently, have denied that Marx's materialism can be justified. Lecourt puts the view that it is of the essence of materialism not to seek to found or to guarantee the objectivity of knowledge. He mentions Bachelard who, as he puts it: 'is posing the thesis of the objectivity of scientific knowledges' (p12 in Marxism and Epistemology, D. Lecourt, NLB, 1975). And he suggests that, in Spinozist terms: the truth is its own measure. Knowledge just is objective. This claim needs no justification. And Ruben tells us that 'the whole epistemological programme of systematic justification of our knowledge must be rejected, along with the impeachment of the mind-independence of the material world (p97, op.cit.). He argues that the attempt to justify knowledge is an impossible one. It cannot be carried out.

I see no good reason for the claim that knowledge of the external world cannot be justified. A proof that it cannot would bring in precisely the problems that would be involved in an attempted justification. One would have to prove that necessarily the sceptical problem will re-appear whatever the proposed solution. Certainly, one can argue that particular attempts to do the job have been unsuccessful. But that is insufficient for what is required. And, if it is of the essence of materialism to deny the importance of the idealists' problem, then so much the worse for materialism. I deny that it need be, however.

Richard Norman, in Hegel's Phenomenology, gives what he tells us is Hegel's reason why a theory of knowledge cannot be justified. His argument is that it cannot be because whatever is used to justify it will be itself a claim to knowledge. Hegel, according to Norman, offers, instead of an external criterion for knowledge, an internal one. But in order for something to count as a criterion, we must be able to distinguish it from what it is a criterion of, so the objection, if it is an objection to the use of an external criterion, is also an objection to the use of an internal one. But does the objection hold water? I think not. One can provide a criterion for knowledge - e.g. that it should consist in clear and distinct ideas - which is not itself a claim to knowledge. It could be a stipulation, or a claim that is hypostatised as true though is not known to be.

I shall go on now to describe and to attempt to justify Marx's materialism.
Marx's Materialism

There are several ways of justifying Marx's materialism. One might adopt Lenin's procedure; that is, one could set out to show that the idealist's conclusion is incompatible with some belief that any reasonable person must hold, but that the materialist view is not. Or one might challenge the idealist premises, and then show that materialism is the only reasonable alternative. The trouble with the first of these two ways of carrying on is that the idealist always has a comeback. He can argue: 'Yes, of course my conclusion is incompatible with that belief, and I hold that belief. But that belief needs justifying, and it was precisely in order to justify it that I was led to my conclusion. If I have to choose between denying my conclusion and denying that belief, I'll choose the latter.' It is only when the acceptance of the idealist's belief can be shown to be clearly irrational, that the materialist's argument begins to bite. A difficulty with opting for the second procedure may be that the idealist can always retreat to premises which are clearly self-evident, or, if not self-evident, at least necessarily true in some sense. For example, a premise like 'I am now writing' put by me, while not necessarily true in some sense that its negation is self-contradictory, is, in some sense, undeniable. It cannot coherently be said to be both false and meaningful. The idealist may retract into premises which are like this one.

But there is another way of justifying a materialist position. This is simply to present arguments in its favour. And, clearly, the stronger the arguments, the more likely they are to be acceptable. One compelling feature of Berkleyan idealism is its attempt to ground knowledge on premises which are as certainly true as any can be. If one could show that materialism rests on a similarly strong foundation, then, the question: 'Which theory ought I to accept?' will come to rest on something other than the fact that one rests on sure foundations while the other does not. It may turn out - perhaps indeed, it must turn out this way - that this justification will involve challenging the idealists' premises, and thus it will bring in the second procedure.

Before justifying Marx's materialism in this way I must begin describing it. The subject material of Marx's materialist conception of history is material life. What is this? An answer is: '[People], their activity, and the material conditions under which they live' (p31, German Ideology). But why material life? In order to give a general characterisation of materialism one would have to be less specific than this surely? One would, but one might come to capture the essence of materialism by discussing one of its aspects. And, after all, the idealist restricts the domain of his concerns. The Berkleyan idealist began with the question: 'What is that I can claim to know with the highest possible degree of certainty?' Why begin with what I, the individual, can claim to know?

So let us continue discussing material life. In the German Ideology Marx tells us: 'We must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence, the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to 'make history'. But life involves, before all else, eating, and drinking, a habitation, clothing, and many other things. The first historical act is therefore the production of means to satisfy these needs, ' (p99, The German Ideology). He goes on, in that work, to proffer a distinguishing characteristic of human beings from animals: 'They themselves [men] begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they began to produce their means of subsistence...' (p7).

In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Marx tells us that, in contra-distinction to the Hegelian view, 'Man is a natural being' ... 'he is an active natural being' (p181).

Can one give any of this the kind of justification the idealist claims to be able to offer for his basic premises? One might state Marx's 'basic' premise as follows:

(I) Natural beings have basic needs.

Let us assume that by 'basic need' is meant 'need that must be satisfied before other needs can be'. And, further, a need is, by definition, a want that must be satisfied.

Assuming that there are such things as 'natural beings', (I) may be falsified in one of two ways. The being might have no needs at all, or it might have no basic needs. What would a being with non-basic, but no basic needs be like? It would be a creature with bodily characteristics, and certain high level wants and capacities, but without, e.g. the need to eat, to defecate, to breathe, to exhale carbon dioxide. Certainly one can imagine very different forms of life from those we have got - isn't this just what we are being asked to conceive of when we are told to think about the possibility of life on another planet? But to argue that there could be beings with wants but no needs is rather like arguing that there could be a mathematical series that began in the middle, and it really was the middle. Wouldn't we simply redefine what counted as the beginning of the series in such a case? Thus the series of natural numbers might start at number 10; number 10 would be the first member of the series. Similarly, the supposition

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Basic needs must be satisfied. These are:

1. Natural beings have basic needs, and they have them for a period of time.

2. Basic needs must be satisfied.

3. In order to satisfy their basic needs, some natural beings must produce their means of subsistence.

One might justify (2) in the following manner. If the natural being is to survive, it must satisfy its basic needs. Or, put another way, if the being is to continue to be a being with basic needs, it must satisfy them. We could insert the extra premiss:

(1/) Natural beings have basic needs, and they have them for a period of time.

(1/) must be true, because if it is allowed that the being might cease to have basic needs, that would be to contradict (1). (2) then gives one of the necessary conditions for the truth of (1).

(3) can be given a similar kind of justification. If natural beings continually went around consuming everything without producing, they would eventually have nothing left to consume. So, in order to survive, or to continue to be a natural being, at least some of them must produce. This time, one has to interpret (1) as implying that the being has basic needs for a relatively long period of time. Then (3) becomes a necessary condition for (2).

(For the sake of the argument, 'natural being' in (1) and (2) can be taken to include animals, while in (3) those who produce may be construed as the human beings.)

Another way of putting this is 'if (1) is true, then so are (2) and (3)'. But (1) is necessarily true.

The justification of (3) depends upon the assumption that nature reproduces itself less rapidly than consumers consume. Certainly this is accepted as true, in fact, but must it be? I think so, for the following reason: if something reproduced itself more quickly than it consumed, it would be producing gradually less and less 'worthy' specimens, specimens that would eventually die out through lack of nourishment. This point can be generalised to support the criterion that nature must reproduce itself less rapidly than consumers consume.

This argument is almost parallel to some arguments against the sceptic about the existence of objects in the external world. The sceptic is taken to doubt or deny that objects continue to exist when not perceived. The argument against this takes the form of proving that the truth of what he doubts or denies is a necessary condition for something that he cannot doubt or deny being true. Similarly, one might imagine some kind of 'sceptic' denying that natural beings must produce. But they must produce if they are to continue to have basic needs, a view we take our 'sceptic' to accept. And the similarity in the argument to some that are used against the sceptic provides some support for the view that this 'materialist' argument is one which the idealist should not take too lightly.

If the arguments I have offered stand up, this 'foundation' of Marx's materialism can be given a similar kind of justification to the theory of the Berkeleyan idealist.

What I am arguing effectively, then, is that Marx's materialist conception of history should be construed as a kind of 'naturalism'. It is a theory about human need. Clearly it must be differentiated from other forms of naturalism - one distinguishing mark will be that as well as its being a theory about the way in which human needs are satisfied, it also concerns the production of new needs: people not only reproduce their needs but develop new ones and change themselves in the process.

Upon these roots grow the various strands of Marx's materialist conception of history.

The view outlined above is unlike Althusser's. It does not hypothesise two logically separate languages - dialectical and historical materialism - one being used as a vantage point from which the other is justified. So it is not open to the objections to which that position succumbs.

The Materialist Conception of History

The idea of natural beings as producers of means of subsistence has been justified. The rest of the theory develops out of this idea - that of natural beings as producers, and, in particular from the concept of a 'mode of production'.

I'd like, now, to examine that concept and to attempt to work out a way around a problem that has reared its head at various moments in the history of Marxism. I'll outline the problem by delving a little into the state of 'philosophical Marxism' at the time of Stalin and subsequently.
During the Stalin epoch it was supposed to be commonplace in the Marxist movement that philosophical materialism entailed historical materialism and that, from the philosophical materialist thesis that matter existed first, it followed that it is changes in the 'material life' of society - in the productive forces - that bring about major changes in social life (see J. Stalin, Dialectical Materialism, pp382-86 in Stalin, Works, Vol. I, Lawrence and Wishart, 1963). Humanist and other subsequent Marxist thinkers found fault with this. Apart from the dubious political views that were justified in its name, it appeared to lead to fatalism, and to allow no room for an independent culture. And, if ideas were only reflections of things, how could ideas revolutionize things? People were keen, therefore, to disassociate Marx from determinism. They referred to works of the early Marx, and particularly to the Theses on Feuerbach, in support of an anti-determinist position. Here is Sidney Hook on Thesis I: Marx sought to save the idealist's insight that knowledge is active. Otherwise his own historical materialism would result in fatalism. The starting point of perception is not an object on the one hand and a subject opposed to it on the other, but an interacting process within which sensations are just as much the resultant of the active mind (the total organism) as the things acted upon. What is beheld in perception, then, depends just as much upon the perceiver as upon the antecedent cause of the perception.

But, contrary to this, it seems that even the early Marx held some kind of determinist view. In other words, it is the production and reproduction of real life which is causally responsible for ideas, conceiving and so on. And this is a determinism about the production of ideas etc. As yet insufficient has been said for us to know exactly what is determining what; nonetheless it is a determinist theory. If we deny the determinism we must deny the 'determination' of ideas by the production of real life; we must, therefore, deny the materialist conception of history. Any variant of historical materialism which doubts that it is a determinist theory must be a watered-down version; one which, in the end, might just as well be labelled an 'idealist' theory as a 'materialist' one.

So the problem then becomes: given that Marx was some kind of determinist, how is it that, also on his view, ideas can revolutionise things? I propose to introduce two constraints upon a successful account of the part of the materialist conception of history that relates to this problem. First of all, it must be compatible with Marx's determinism. Yet it must allow that the proletariat can revolutionize things; and, secondly, it must retain individuals and classes as pivotal to the theory.

I propose to attempt to uncover a solution to the problem by discussing the relation between 'material life' and 'consciousness'. My argument will not necessarily bear on the question of the

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relation between the material 'base' of society and the 'superstructure'.

Marx mentions the relation in several places, and offers what appear, on the face of things, to be incompatible accounts of its nature. Here are some examples:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. (my italics) (p32, The German Ideology)

Later in the same passage, we find out that:

Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their conscious life process.

(ity italics) (ibid, p33)

But, in the Preface to the Critique of Political Economy, we find:

It is their social being that determines (or conditions) their consciousness.

(p181, Selected Works)

It looks as though there are at least two different accounts of the nature of the relation here. On the one hand, it is identity - consciousness is one and the same thing as conscious existence. On the other, it seems to be some sort of causal relation - consciousness is determined by life. I suggest that, rather than charging Marx with inconsistency, we interpret the relation as having a double aspect. There is a relation of identity between the two but the relation is also causal. How can this be? Kripke argues that statements of identity, if true, are necessarily true, because they concern a relation between 'rigid designators': terms which designate the same object in any possible world in which they designate at all (see S. Kripke, pp309-43, 'Naming & Necessity' in Semantics of Natural Languages, eds. D. Davidson & F. Harman, Reidel, 1972). On his view, natural kind terms, as well as names, are rigid designators. Now, if the statement that 'consciousness is conscious existence' were necessarily true, then, for Kripkean reasons, it is highly unlikely that there could be a causal relation of any sort between consciousness and conscious existence. Even if one doubts the truth of some views on the subject, the view that the causal relation between a cause and its effect, if it holds on the actual world, holds in every possible world, is highly implausible. But I don't think we need hold that the statement in question is necessarily true, even if one believes that names and natural kind terms are rigid designators. For the terms in question do not designate rigidly.

To support this point, I'd like to look at a parallel identity statement between singular terms to the one we have been considering. We could take: 'the one working on the production line' as a particular instance of the general term: 'producer of use values' - taking 'conscious existence' to relate to production of use values. And 'the one discussing wages with the manager' could count as an instance of 'those with consciousness'. If the two descriptions are true of one and the same person, then the one discussing wages is identical with the one working on the production line. But the relation between 'the one working ... ' and 'the one discussing wages' is not a rigid relation. This is because 'the one discussing wages' does not designate the person rigidly; rather it designates the individual for a particular period of his existence. 'The one discussing wages' is the one and the same person as 'the one working ... ' but there is a counter-factual situation in which that person is not the one discussing wages.

I am not arguing, here, for a view like Frege's (see G. Frege: 'On Sense and Reference', in Trans. from Frege, Blackwell, 1966) - that identity statements are contingent because they hold between items under different descriptions. I'm suggesting, rather, that there is a class of identity statements which are contingent, because the two terms designate different 'time slices' of the one individual.

On Frege's view, the statement 'Guirisanker is Everest' is contingent, but it need not be on the view I am advocating. What makes it contingent, on the Fregean view, is the point of view from which one and the same thing is observed. But it is not the relation between observer and person which produces the contingency of the statement I am considering. Rather, it is produced by the two descriptions picking out different 'time slices' of the one individual. So the above argument need not bear on the question whether or not identity statements between names are necessarily true.

If the relation is a contingent identity, it is not ruled out that it is also causal. And I'd like to support the view that it is causal, by looking at an analogy. One might describe a particular policeman either as 'that policeman' or as 'that man'; and there could be the appropriate relation of identity between the person and itself. But one could also suppose it to be true that the man as a man is conditioned or determined by the man as a policeman. The person's life as a man could well be conditioned by his role as a policeman. Similarly, it could be true that people as thinking beings are conditioned or determined by people as producers. The individual qua thinking being is a reflection of the person as producer. To take our example: the one who is discussing wages is conditioned or determined by the person working on the production line.

How does this relate to the determinism problem? It is compatible with Marx's determinism, because the view is that people as thinkers are determined (or conditioned) by people as producers. But since
it allows that some thoughts may not be conditioned by the environment, it is also compatible with Marx’s view that a person or a class may influence the environment.

A problem that might arise is the following, put by Cohen as an objection to Engels’ graveside speech. According to Engels:

Marx discovered the law of development of all human history; the simple fact that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion etc., and that, therefore, the production of the immediate material means of subsistence and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art and even the ideas and religion of the people concerned, have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained...

(see G. A. Cohen in Essays In Honor of E. H. Carr, p83)

Cohen comments that this passage is offering us one of two inferences: either that from (a) Men must produce food if they are to engage in politics etc., to (b) the activity of material production is the foundation on which those activities rest; or that from (b) to (c) the activity of material production, together with the degree of economic development, explains those activities. And he labels (c) the ‘indispensability claim’. Cohen responds: ‘The indispensability claim is impregnable, but it cannot make material production prior to mental, as far as explanation is concerned. For mental production is also indispensable to life and indispensability is a transitive relation.’ He suggests that there are two ways in which material production requires mental production. First, mental activity enters into material production, and the capacity to perform those activities depends upon mental production and general culture; and, secondly, religion and/or law and/or ideology are essential to secure order in the labour process (to discipline the labouring agents) and an ordering of the labour process (to organise production).

Now Engels’ view is different from mine, because I am not explaining mental production by reference to material production; nonetheless if Cohen is right that mental production must enter into material production my thesis would not be compatible with Marx’s determinism. But I do not think it must. There are material productions not involving mental activity - for instance, a bee building a hive, or an ant a nest. And there is none involved for particular people who are performing movements in relation to a conveyor belt that they have carried out many times before. Perhaps, too, there was none in the Stone Age character’s first rubbing of the two flints together. Maybe it was done by instinct. Moreover, primitive communism required no religion and/or law and/or ideology. I conclude, then, that the objection does not affect my argument.

Another objection that may be levelled against my argument is that I have re-introduced an over-simplified account of the relation between ‘material production’ and ‘consciousness’, one which the young Marx might have upheld but which Marx in his maturity would certainly have rejected. It is worth noting that, as this objection would probably be put, it would be phrased in terms of the relation between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’. For instance, Stuart Hall (in ‘Base and Superstructure’, in Class, Hegemony and Party, Lawrence & Wishart, 1977) argues that the young Marx saw the relation between ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ as an identity, the latter simply reflecting the former. He claims that Marx began rejecting this in the 18th Brumaire, in the light of the non-correspondence of the ‘classes in dominance at the economic level and the class factions in power, at the level of politics and state’ (ibid, p57).

Hall assumes that the immature Marx held three views conjointly: that ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ are identical; that the one reflects the other (ibid, p53); and simple economic determinism (ibid, p53). He does not so much as hint at their incompatibility or suggest that this might be a reason for doubting that Marx held all three. It is apparently obvious to Hall that Marx held all three (though he does not distinguish them one from another) and obvious that each - or, at least, simple economic determinism - is incorrect. I hope I have said enough to dispel the illusion that economic determinism is simply and obviously wrong. My formulation concerns the relation between ‘material production’ and ‘consciousness’ and, though it is compatible with determination, it does not lead to the one being nothing but a reflex of the other.

To conclude this section: I have offered an interpretation of the relation between ‘material production’ and ‘consciousness’ which is compatible with Marx’s determinism, but which allows that people may revolutionize things.

I make no claims to have solved the various problems concerning the relation between the base of society and the ‘legal and political superstructure’.

Overall Conclusion

Marx’s materialism, I have argued, is not a philosophical materialism of any sort. His materialism is equivalent to his materialist conception of history. Despite its not being a philosophical theory, it does not follow that it cannot be justified in the kind of way an idealist might come to accept.

This is only the beginnings of an account of all that the materialist conception of history has to offer us, but it is one which remains largely within Marx’s conceptual territory. To that extent, perhaps unlike Althusser’s theory, it can lay claim to being Marxist.