MARX'S MATERIALIST CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

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Abstract:

Marx called his philosophical position a materialism; he was concerned, however, with social life, not with matter as the ultimate constituent of the universe. His materialism is a thesis about the relation between the forms which social life takes and the content which constitutes that life. Traditional materialisms are unable to address themselves to the particular concerns of Marx. Consequently, an alternative source must be found in order to explicate his materialism. Using Aristotle's distinction between form and matter from the central books of the *Metaphysics*, I show how Marx's materialism is a corrective to the formal determinism of Hegel.
Marx's Materialist Concept of Democracy

In his 1843 *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, Marx made the claim that monarchy is democracy in contradiction with itself. In all political systems, the content of the system is democratic. The *demos* makes up the government and the government rules only through the *demos*. While a monarchy has the people for its content, its form denies that content by placing sovereignty in the person of a single individual. In any constitution, the ground lies with the people. A constitution is a social phenomenon, the historical product of the free activity of actual men in the community. Any government which is not democratic in form thereby denies its content by restricting that content.

This claim is central both to the *Critique* and to the *Manuscripts of 1844*. In his 1888 "Preface" to the English edition of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Engels credits Marx with having already worked out the central position of their philosophy before the composition of the Manifesto. If indeed, Marx was working out the position of historical materialism in his early writings, then we might expect the above claim about democracy to shed some light on what Marx meant by calling his social philosophy a materialism. At the same time, we might expect his materialist metaphysics to shed light on his theory of democracy.

When we turn to the early Marxists, we begin to see some of the difficulties surrounding the concept of matter. A major difficulty with Engel's writings stems from his identification of historical materialism with natural science. For him human history is a process of evolution continuous with natural history. Materialism has as its basic problem the discovery of the laws of motion of the historical process. Natural science and philosophy gradually merge so that the result is "a simple world outlook which has to establish its validity and be applied not in a science of sciences standing apart, but within the positive sciences." The science which replaces philosophy is economics.


The materialist concept of history starts from the principle that production, and with production the exchange of its products, is the basis of every social order; that in every society which has appeared in history the distribution of the products, and with it the division of society into classes or estates, is determined by what is produced and how it is produced, and how the product is exchanged. According to this conception, the ultimate causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in the minds of men, in their increasing insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the mode of production and exchange; they are to be sought not in the philosophy but in the economics of the epoch concerned.3

Certainly Marx was interested in explicating the forms of social existence in terms of the modes of production and exchange prevalent within those forms, but it is not clear in what sense the modes of production and exchange can be said to be the ultimate causes of social and political change. Furthermore, it is not at all clear that Marx would agree that the causes of social change are to be found in the economics of an epoch to the exclusion of the philosophy. Instead he would insist that the philosophy and economics of an epoch cannot be divorced from one another.

A corrective to Engel's 'scientific' conception of historical materialism is provided by Plekhanov. Plekhanov, emphasizing the Feuerbachian aspects of Marx's writings, came up with a more plausible Marx in spite of not having access to the early writings. Taking from Feuerbach and Engels the claim that "it is not thinking that determines being, but being that determines thinking,"4 Plekhanov emphasized that the being of man is social and historical. Idealism took as its point of departure the abstract "I." As a result an unbridgeable gulf was created between the subject and object. Materialism, in order to overcome this gulf, begins not with the abstract "I," but with the subject which is at the same time an object. "I am an actual being; my body belongs to my essence; moreover, my body, as a whole, is my I, my genuine essence. It is not an abstract being that thinks, but this actual being, this body."5

3Engels, Anti-Duhring, p. 292.


5Plekhanov, Fundamental Problems of Marxism, p. 29.
Plekhanov notes Marx's critique of Feuerbach for having made man the passive recipient of the action of the material world upon the human organism, but he still succumbs to the temptation of interpreting Marx's materialism in terms of a physiological analysis of the human organism.

While Plekhanov attempts to hold on to both a view of man as activity and a reduction of consciousness to physiological processes, Lenin loses grasp of the active nature of man altogether. He casts the opposition between idealism and materialism into purely Cartesian terms.

The materialist elimination of the "dualism of spirit and body" (i.e. materialist monism) consists in the assertion that the spirit does not exist independently of the body, that spirit is secondary, a function of the brain, a reflection of the external world. The idealist elimination of the "dualism of spirit and body" (i.e. idealist monism) consists in the assertion that spirit is not a function of the body, that consequently, spirit is primary, that the "environment" and the "self" exist only in an inseparable connection of one and the same "complexes of elements."

The active role of man toward nature seems to play no part in Lenin's epistemology. Man's knowledge of the world is understood in terms of the laws of physics and neurophysiology. "Sensation depends on the brain, nerves, retina, etc., i.e., on matter organized in a definite way. . . . Sensation, thought, consciousness are the supreme product of matter organized in a particular way." This is the view Lenin adopts for himself and attributes to Marx.

Of the classical Marxists, Bukharin is perhaps the most straightforward in casting the issues between idealism and materialism into Cartesian terms. For him it is "the question as the relation between matter and mind, which in simple parlance is often spoken of as the relation between 'soul' and 'body.'"

6 Plekhanov, Fundamental Problems of Marxism, pp. 31-32.
7 Plekhanov, Fundamental Problems of Marxism, pp. 34-36.
9 Lenin, Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, p. 48.
Mind, according to Bukharin, develops out of and remains dependent upon matter. "Psychic phenomena, the phenomena of consciousness, are simply a property of matter organized in a certain manner, a 'function' of such matter."11

With the exception of Plekhanov's, these conceptions of materialism simply do not address the issues which concerned Marx. He was not concerned to develop a physical theory, but a social theory. His interests were not in physical processes but in social activities. The concept of matter as extended substance describable in terms of the laws of physical motion is simply not relevant to the questions which concerned Marx.

While the Cartesian categories dominated the theoretical work of the classical Marxists, later theoreticians have taken a decidedly different turn. Horkheimer, for example, specifically attacked the interpretation of materialism which could be "reduced to the simple claim that only matter and its movements are real."12 Such a materialism, Horkheimer points out, is not the philosophical antithesis of idealism as it develops out of the philosophy of Kant, but instead is the antithesis of what he calls spiritualism, a view perhaps best exemplified in the philosophy of Berkeley. Marcuse has demonstrated that the opposition between idealism and materialism concerns the relative status of consciousness and labor in the activity of world-creation. "Hegel treats [the establishment of a real, objective world] merely as the alienation of 'consciousness' or knowledge, or as the relation of abstract thought to 'thinghood', while Marx grasps it as the 'practical' realization of the whole of man in historical and social labor."13

Merleau-Ponty moves quite close to what I consider to be Marx's view when he points out that "matter" and "consciousness" are not separable. Man, as a subjective being, must be defined as a relation to instruments and objects.14 It is in this way that man becomes objective. "Matter plain and simple, exterior to man and in terms of which his behavior could be explained,

11 Burkharin, Historical Materialism, p. 55.
is simply not at issue." What is at issue is the way a given society relates to nature and appropriates nature for its own use.

Whatever matter is then, it is not res extensa, the matter-in-motion discussed by Descartes or the early Marxists. Nature is not a realm describable totally in terms of a physics which abstracts from the world only those properties of things which have no reference to human qualities. The question before us now is whether there is a concept of matter which is consistent with recent criticisms of classical Marxism and can serve as the metaphysical foundation for the social and political claims made by Marx. There is, I think, such a concept and it is to be found in Aristotle.

In the central books of the Metaphysics, Zeta, Eta, and Theta, Aristotle investigates the nature of sensible substance. The form of sensible substance is both its shape and that by means of which it is knowable. It also makes the sensible a determinate something. The matter is that out of which a thing is made. It may be the matter for something (the acorn is the matter for the oak), or it may be the matter of something (the brick is the matter of the house). The term "matter," for Aristotle, primarily refers to something in a particular stage of a dynamic process. It refers to brick and acorns only in so far as they can be considered as part of some process of becoming.

In the initial discussion, Aristotle asks whether substance is form, matter, or composite. It cannot be form, for form is always a 'such' and never a 'this'. Substance must be a determinate something. Substance cannot be matter, for matter is, without form, indeterminate. And he dismisses the composite since it is posterior to both form and matter. In dismissing the composite of form and matter as substance, Aristotle is considering the form and the matter as separable parts of a whole. Considered in this way, the composite is posterior since its form and its matter are necessary conditions for its having come to be in the first place.

Later Aristotle argues that substance is the composite, but form and matter are not parts of something. At this point, however, he is setting up the aporia, the problem or difficulty which gives rise to the philosophical discussion which follows. This aporia or problem is significant for understanding the issues between Marx and the German idealists because it shifts the problem from one of sufficiency of a single principle to one of priority among principles which are jointly and only

jointly sufficient. While neither material principles nor formal principles alone are sufficient principles of substance, one may in some yet unspecified sense be prior to the other.

Form and matter are not only principles of substance, but also causes, along with the efficient cause (that by the operation of which a thing comes to be what it is), and the final cause (the end or 'for which' the thing comes to be what it is). An important insight into the nature of substance emerges due to the applicability of Aristotle's model of causality to substance. Ordinarily we think of causality as being applicable, not to things, but to events. A causal account is generally of the form, "if event A occurs, it will be followed by event B" or "Event B occurred due to the previous occurrence of event A." Aristotle has no difficulty with these more common causal accounts. What is interesting, though, is the suggestion that substance has an eventful character to it. A thing, a composite of form and matter, is not just a piece of inert matter in a particular shape. Things, all things, have a natural history. They come to be and they perish. Between times they endure. While they endure, many accidental things may happen to them, but there is something essential about their coming to be.

At this point another thread weaves its way into the Aristotelian analysis. Sensible substances are things which come to be; that is, they are generated. That which is generated is a substance and that out of which it is generated, its matter, was a potentiality for the thing's having come to be. If it is the case that those things which are generated are substances, then the composite, not the form or the matter, is substance. When one makes a bronze statue from a bronze ingot, one does not make the bronze. Of course, one may have previously made the ingot from copper and tin, but then what was being made was not the statue but the ingot. Similarly, one does not make the form or shape when one makes the statue. "Form' signifies a such and this is not a this and a definite thing."16 What is made, this bronze statue, is a certain material in a certain shape or form, a composite of form and matter. Only the composite is a definite substance or a something.

Since form is a 'such' and not a 'this', there is no need to take the Platonic step of setting up the forms as separate substances for "that which begets is sufficient to produce and to be the cause of the form in the matter."17 The reason Aristotle can reject the necessity of positing forms as separate from composite entities is that both form and matter pre-exist

16Metaphysics 1033b23.
17Metaphysics 1034a5-6.
in other composite entities as necessary preconditions for generation. Generation must be out of something and that something exists as a composite.

Let us now consider more closely Aristotle's distinction between actuality and potentiality and how that distinction is related to the one between form and matter. If we consider a given entity, not as entity but as matter, we consider it in its potentiality. This ingot of bronze which we have is potentially a sphere, a statue, a sword, or many other different entities. As matter, it is material for something which it itself is not but could become. As an entity in itself, however, it is this definite and particular bronze ingot. As actuality, it is determinate; as potentiality, it is indeterminate. What could give actuality to one of the potentialities of our bronze ingot? It would have to be given a definite form or shape and there would have to be somebody who had the skill and the motive to shape it. If it were given the form of a sphere, it would be a definite and determinate bronze sphere, actually rather than potentially. It is the form which makes for the actuality of a substance. The power or potentiality for actuality resides in the matter.

What we have, then, is a view of matter which focuses, not on the physical characteristics of weight, mass, and velocity, but on position within the process of becoming. Matter is the dynamic potentiality for the modes of being. That which is is matter for that which will become. It is a concept of matter which has its home, not in modern physical science, but in natural history and, by extension, in human history.

It now remains to be shown how this concept of matter can serve as a basis for Marx's political views. First we should note that Marx had the highest praise for materialisms other than his own. Writing on Cartesian materialism, he says:

No great acumen is required to see the necessary connection of materialism with communism and socialism from the doctrines of materialism concerning the original goodness and equal intellectual endowment of man, the omnipotence of experience, habit and education, the influence of external circumstances on man, the extreme importance of industry, the justification of enjoyment, etc. If man forms all his knowledge, perception, etc., from the world of sense and experience in the world of sense, then it follows that the empirical world must be so arranged that he experiences and gets used to what is truly human in it, that he experiences himself as man. If enlightened interest is the principle of all morality, it follows that men's private interests
should coincide with human interests. If man is unfree in the materialistic sense—that is, is free not through the negative capacity to avoid this or that but through the positive power to assert his true individuality—crime must not be punished in the individual but the anti-social sources of crime must be destroyed to give everyone social scope for the essential assertion of his vitality. If man is formed by circumstances, then his circumstances must be made human. If man is by nature social, then he develops his true nature only in society and the power of his nature must be measured not by the power of the single individual but by the power of society.18

Yet while lavishing such praise on previous materialisms, he is still sharply critical.

The chief defect of all previous materialism (including Feuerbach's) is that the object, actuality, sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the object or perception [Anschauung], but not as sensuous human activity [Praxis], not subjectively. Hence in opposition to materialism the active side was developed by idealism—but only abstractly since idealism naturally does not know actual sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects actually different from thought objects; but he does not comprehend human activity itself as objective.19

Another consequence Marx sees deriving from the old materialism is a view of society as composed of separate individuals each pursuing his own self-interest. "The highest point attained by perceptual materialism, that is, materialism that does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is the view of separate individuals and civil society."20 This in turn leads to class division and political elitism. "The materialistic doctrine concerning the change of circumstances and education forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator himself be educated. Hence this doctrine must divide

19. Writings of the Young Marx, p. 400.
20. Writings of the Young Marx, p. 402.
society into two parts—one of which towers above. It is interesting to note that while Marx's criticism is here directed against bourgeois society and those philosophies which legitimize it, it is equally applicable to the materialism of the classical Marxists and to the political practice which was derived from that philosophy.

In order to overcome the deficiencies of the old materialism, Marx must develop a materialism which captures the nature of man as activity and the actuality of man as a social being engaged in historical praxis. "The essence of man is no abstraction in her single individual. In its actuality it is the ensemble of social relationships."22 The old materialism had taken as its standpoint the civil society which emerged upon the collapse of feudalism. The new materialism must take as its standpoint "human society or socialized humanity."23

Marx undertakes this task by analysing the human condition in terms of the activities in which men engage and the forms or institutions which arise out of and structure those activities. The critique of individualism and the resulting contract theories of the state had been successfully carried out by Hegel in the Philosophy of Right. Contract theory begins with the individual prior to community. This concept of the individual, Hegel points out, is an abstraction from concrete man in society. The concreteness of man, according to Hegel, is only achieved through the objective will of the state. In Aristotelian terms, it is only in the state that man has the formal determinateness of actuality. The individual, the family, and civil society achieve their determinateness only in the state. Marx claims that Hegel has reversed the true relationship.

The fact is that the state issues from the mass of men existing as members of families and of civil society; but speculative philosophy expresses this fact as an achievement of the Idea, not the idea of the mass, but rather as the deed of an Idea-Subject which is differentiated from the fact itself in such a way that the function assigned to the individual . . . is visibly mediated by circumstances, caprice, etc. Thus empirical actuality is admitted just as it is and is also said to be rational; but not rational because of its own reason, but because the empirical

21 Writings of the Young Marx, p. 401.

22 Writings of the Young Marx, p. 402.

23 Writings of the Young Marx.
fact in its empirical existence has a significance which is other than itself.\textsuperscript{24}

Marx is claiming that it is the mass of individuals who are the substance and subjects, and the state is a historical accident of their subjective life.

The substantiality of the state, according to Hegel, is the educated mind knowing and willing itself. If this mind is taken as substance, then the determinate powers and interests of the state are the concrete modes of its existence, its self-actualization. Because Hegel takes the Idea as subject, however, the actual empirical willing subject becomes the mode and the social structures become the subject and substance. Marx seeks to reverse this ontological relationship so that the empirical subjects are seen as substantive and the social structures as modes of human existence. Where Hegel takes the rationality of the actual as a given, Marx takes it as a problem. The rationality of the actual is a matter for investigation, and if the actual proves to be irrational, then it is a task for man to shape the world according to his reason.

In arguing for the substantiality of the state and the dependence of civil society upon the state, Hegel sets up an opposition between the two. As a member of civil society, the individual is private and particular. As an agent of the state, he serves on the basis of his universal and objective qualities. Being a political man and being a private individual does not entail belonging to different ontological spheres. Hegel forgets that particular individuality is a human individual, and that the activities and agencies of the state are human activities. He forgets that the nature of the particular person is not his beard, his blood, his abstract \textit{Physis}, but rather his social quality, and that the activities of the state, etc., are nothing but the modes of existence and operation of the social qualities of men.\textsuperscript{25}

For Hegel (and unfortunately for many contemporary political commentators) the political office has a life and objectivity of its own independently of the particular private individual who happens to hold it. Marx argues that, to the contrary, to speak of the private individual as someone removed from the political realm is to abstract a certain set of properties from the total which constitutes an actual man. If, as a matter of fact, political man and private man belong to different spheres,

\textsuperscript{24}Marx, \textit{Critique}, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{25}Marx, \textit{Critique}, p. 22.
that is a reflection of man's historical alienation from himself. Such is the condition of modern man, but to claim substantive actuality for the political office is only to mystify the alienated condition.

We can now begin to see how Marx's materialism and his conception of democracy are related. Social institutions arise out of and remain dependent upon the activity of historical men engaged in social living. By making the activity of historical individuals determinative of rationality rather than disembodied reason determinative of the concrete forms lived by those individuals, Marx reverses the legitimated authority of the state. To the claim that it is proper to speak of the sovereignty of the people only so far as they form themselves into a state, Marx replies, "As though the people were not the real state. The state is an abstraction; the people alone is concrete."26 In making this move, Marx is shifting attention away from the forms of social and political life to the content of those forms or the matter of which they are determinations. Marx's philosophy is a materialism because it asserts the primacy of the activity of the human species over the historical forms which that activity takes.

Political activity is only one mode of human activity. Democracy has as its basis the entire scope of human existence, while other forms of government, including republicanism, restrict this scope to mere legal form. Here the distinction between idealism and materialism is reflected in the methods used by each. "Hegel proceeds from the state and makes man into the subjectified state; democracy starts with man and makes the state objectified man."27 Marx's method, only foreshadowed in Critique but fully developed in the later writings, is to analyse the social activity of man through which he objectifies himself. Hegel, on the other hand, begins with the logically predetermined Idea and analyses human activity as the incarnation of the Idea. A basic problem for both Hegel and Marx is the unity of form and matter of social existence. Hegel tries to establish this unity by beginning with the form which he sees as determining its content through the historical processes. Marx's alternative is to begin with the content, concrete human existence, and to develop a unity by showing how content gives rise to form through the material processes of history.

While Hegel tends to identify democracy with republicanism, Marx is very careful to distinguish the two. All forms of the modern state, including republics as particular forms of government, create a bifurcation of political man and private man.

26 Marx, Critique, p. 28.
27 Marx, Critique, p. 30.
Property, contract, marriage, civil society appear here (just as Hegel quite rightly develops them for abstract forms of the state, except that he means to develop the Idea of the state) as particular modes of existence alongside the political state; that is, they appear as the content to which the political state relates as organizing form, or really only as the determining, limiting intelligence which says now 'yes' now 'no' without any content of its own.

When the state assumes universal form and ranges over content which does not correspond with that form, then the state is of necessity an organ of repression. It imposes an external necessity upon family and civil society. The bifurcation of man into a private sphere and a political sphere is a historical, not a universal condition.

In the Middle Ages, there was serf, feudal property, trade corporation, corporation of scholars, etc., that is, in the Middle Ages property, trade, society, man was political; the material content of the state was fixed by reason of its form; every private sphere had a political character or was a political sphere, or again, politics was also the character of the private man.29

This is not a glorification of times past on Marx's part, but a way of framing the problem. In the Middle Ages, "Man was the actual principle of the state, but he was unfree man."30 The society of the Middle Ages was accomplished alienation. However, it contrasts with the modern state which is an abstraction of man.

The abstract character of the modern state is two-fold. First, while universal in form, it is only particular in content. That is, it is only one species-form, one means by which man objectifies himself through his activity. As a particular which is universalized, it is abstract alienation. Second, the modern state is dependent upon the abstraction of private life. Private life, and its objectification in private property, produces the system of rights and laws which insure that life. But the rights of property are not the rights of particular, concrete persons. As Marx argues, the rights inhere in the property, and the particular property owner becomes an accident of his property.

28 Marx, Critique.
29 Marx, Critique, p. 32.
30 Marx, Critique.
Marx develops the problem of unity of form and matter in the social and political sphere into the problem of the unity of species-form and species-content. Species-forms are the social institutions through which men objectify themselves. Species-content refers to the particular social activities in which men engage. A unity of species-form and species-content arises when the social institutions of a society accurately reflect the varieties of activity engaged in by the members of that society.

As Marx uses the term 'democracy' in the Critique, it stands for the unity of species-form and species-content. Freedom is not necessarily implied, thus he can refer to Medieval society as the democracy of unfreedom. Political struggle can take place either at the level of form or at the level of content. "The struggle between monarchy and republic is itself still a struggle within the abstract form of the state." The republic is the state-form of democracy, but form, contrary to Hegel's view, does not determine content. Thus, Marx points out, "Property, etc., in brief the entire content of law and the state is, with small modification, the same in North America as in Prussia." Instead it is content which determines form.

The question of form and content is intimately related to the question of freedom in both Hegel and Marx. Freedom, for Hegel, is realized through the identity of particular will and universal will as exemplified in the state. Freedom was achieved through knowledge. The particular individual was free when he knew that substantive will was the universal will of the state. Content, the will of the individual members of the state, must conform to form, the universal will.

Where Hegel defines freedom in terms of knowledge, Marx defines it in terms of activity. Species-forms arise out of man's species-activities. Family, state, money, products for consumption, all are various objectifications of man. They are ontologically rooted in the free activity of men. Loss of freedom, alienation, occurs when man gives to these forms an independent existence of their own and then allows these forms to determine content. In a free and democratic society, not only will there be a unity of species-form and species-content, but species-content will have a determining relation to species-form.

By grounding his political theory, not in the logical development of the modern state, nor on the hypothetical agreement of

31 Marx, Critique, p. 31.

32 Marx, Critique.
rational men in a state of nature, but in the dynamic potentiality of men in their species-activity, Marx develops a position that offers both an account of how social institutions have developed historically and provides a critical basis for the constant expansion of human freedom. In this respect his philosophy represents an effective synthesis of the best features of Hegelian rationalism and liberal empiricism.

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