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## Coloring Pages

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David Chevel <davidchevel@gmail.com>  
To: David Chevel <davidchevel@gmail.com>

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If there is anything that can be identified as “Marxism,” it is the Marxist method, both in theoretical and political practice. On the level of theory, this Marxist *method* is dialectical materialism—or if one prefers, a materialist dialectic (emphasizing that what makes a theory materialist are the mechanics of the dialectic itself). When this method is applied to construct a theory of the “social formation,” we get what we call historical materialism. Being a *material*-ist method, Marxism presumably has something to do with the “material.” But what does that mean? What follows is a brief discussion of three **mistaken** and related conceptions of what a Marxist means by “material”: 1) that the “material” refers only to physical objects; 2) that the “material” is synonymous with the “economic”; 3) that the “material” refers to things which are “pre-social,” in the sense of existing “prior” to social relations. The problems with all of these notions will be discussed, followed by a brief description of an alternative.

### The “material” as physical objects

A common misconception about what constitutes the “material” is that the latter refers only to physical objects and the physical properties of those objects. To a large extent, this misconception is aided along by Marx himself. For instance, Marx occasionally refers to the production of commodities as “material production,” in the sense that commodities are physical “things.” Marx also occasionally refers to the production of non-commodities, such as services, as “non-material production.” Additionally, Marx sometimes labels the physical properties of an object (e.g. its chemical composition) as its “material properties.” But does this really mean that Marx’s *material-ism*—the materialism from which we draw when we employ a *materialist* dialectic—only or even primarily concerns itself with physical things and their inherent properties? Despite Marx’s own inconsistency in his terminology, in light of the overall logic that emerges from Marx’s work (especially in the *Grundrisse* and in *Capital*), we have to answer that question with a resounding **no**. This case can be demonstrated rather easily.

The production of surplus value occupies considerable space in the four volumes of *Capital*. Surplus value, plainly stated, is a social relation wherein capitalists—who control means of production—employ workers who only have their labor-power to sell, and wherein the capitalists force workers to labor for longer than is required to reproduce the workers' own existence. In these terms, is surplus value something we can touch or see? Certainly we can see/touch the objects in which surplus value is embodied. We can also clearly see the *effects* of surplus value—the accumulation of wealth into the hands of a relative few, and the impoverishment of most of humanity. But surplus value itself... is this something that we can really say is a physical object? Definitely not; ultimately surplus value is not a “thing” but a relation between people. Can surplus value be considered a physical *property* of an object, inherent to its composition? No; although surplus value has a measure (labor-time), it *cannot* be measured at the level of a commodity's physical properties. As Marx quips, “So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange value [or surplus value for that matter—F.B.] either in a pearl or a diamond.”<sup>1</sup> Commodities may embody surplus value, but only because they are produced within a social relation between workers and capitalists. The relation is *objectified* in the “thing,” but the relation itself is not a “thing.”

Since surplus value and other such social relations occupy so much of Marx's time, and further because Marx is dismissive indeed of looking for answers to social questions at the level of physical properties, one might argue that in spite of his own claims, Marx was *not* a materialist. If materialism necessarily means that one is focused on physical objects and their properties, then perhaps that claim would be right. However, in our view it makes more sense to have a less narrow definition of the “material.” Physical things *are* material, but so are social relations. Relations between people exist beyond the realm of individual will, and they exist externally to our thoughts. In that sense, they are material. In fact, Marx's materialism, for reasons that will be discussed later on, is considerably more interested in social relations than with physical objects/properties.

### **The “material” as the “economic”**

Another frequent misconception about Marxist materialism, again understandable to an extent, is that the “material” is basically synonymous with the “economic.” It does not require much imagination to see how one could reach such a conclusion after studying Marx. Notably, Marx's magnum opus is indeed a critique of political economy and can justifiably be considered a great work of political economy in its own right. Marx also sought to explain the motion of historical events primarily via class struggle, with classes certainly

being *founded* in an economic relation. Marxist theory also contains what are frankly loaded terms such as “base” and “superstructure.” When properly understood, this structural metaphor can help us a great deal when we try to conceptualize the precise relationship between the many facets of society. But a crude and superficial reading of the “base-superstructure” dynamic—one that sees the superstructure as somehow “illusory” or less important—can easily lead one to reductionist conclusions. Such a crude interpretation is given (undue) credibility by some of Marx’s earlier works, where economic reduction is clearly present. Popular interpretations of Marx have also not helped matters. The weight of the Second International, from which economic-reductionist “Marxisms” largely stem, still hangs heavily upon us today (“like a nightmare,” some would say).

To the point: it is common for many claiming Marxism to (at least tacitly) assume that because Marx spent such an effort illuminating the economic relations of capitalist society, then for something to be “material,” to be “real” in the Marxist sense, it must be economic. In other words, it is effectively assumed that Marx’s materialism led him to the economic because the economic is what is “material.” There is consequently an attempt to explain *everything* in economic terms. The categories which Marx laid out in *Capital* (e.g. value, surplus value, social divisions of labor) are applied or adapted to everything under the sun, including to many places where they probably do not belong. Every feature of the “superstructure” must have some direct correspondence to an economic category. Alternatively, things which cannot easily be given economic explanations are ignored. Even unorthodox theories which critique, expand, and modify Marx’s political economy—e.g. the “wages for housework” movement in Italy and the feminist work that sprang from that—still seem to feel pressured to reduce things to an economic explanation, as if they *must* do so to be properly “materialist” and well-grounded.

We must of course acknowledge that at the level of the totality (the “social formation”), Marx considers economic relations to be *foundational* to social systems. This is one of the components of historical materialism which separates it from other social theories. In contrast however, most theorists claiming Marxism attempt to analyze all political, ideological, cultural, etc. phenomena as if they are mere *reflections* of economic relations or are reducible to economic relations in some sense. Again, a classic example would be the insistence among socialist-feminists and the “wages for housework” movement that gender must have originated in a division of labor and must continue to be founded in such a division, as if only that would make the oppression “material.” But there are many other examples—one can basically take one’s pick of Marxist literature and find these patterns.

The difference between the claim that the economic is *foundational* at the level of the social formation, and saying that politics, ideology, culture, etc. are mere *reflections* of economic practices or are simply epiphenomena of the latter, is a topic which deserves its own lengthy discussion. For now, we will focus on another important point. The tendency to reduce “superstructural” phenomena to economic terms is largely a product of Marxists wanting to seem very materialistic (and conflating the economic with the “material”). Unfortunately though, this economic reduction is in fact *idealist!* This claim will surely seem ridiculous at first, but it is the truth. The reason being: materialism and idealism are not so much specific sets of conclusion as they are methodological approaches. As we will see, the economic reduction so common among those claiming Marxism is a product of logic which is fundamentally idealist in its structure, despite superficially “inverting” Hegelian idealism. To be more precise, standing Hegel’s idealist dialectic “on its feet” and winding up with an economic explanation of everything leaves the idealist structure of the dialectic unchanged.

The notion that economic-reductionist or functionalist explanations of social practices are in fact idealist (despite their “materialist” facade) is not an original one, but one which was articulated nicely by Louis Althusser in the essay *Contradiction and Overdetermination*. Although less popular than *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* and others of Althusser’s more widely-read works, *Contradiction and Overdetermination* bears revisiting because although it may be technically less rigorous than later essays, it is arguably more powerful and expresses something more profound.

Althusser argues that a materialist dialectic is not differentiated from an idealist one (e.g. the idealist dialectic of Hegel) by a mere change in its application. The popular conception that for Hegel, the dialectic described the world of the Idea, where for Marx the dialectic is applied to the real world, is basically irrelevant to the question of whether one is a materialist or not. For Althusser, the dialectic cannot simply be extracted from Hegel and applied to “materialist” purposes—idealism is embedded in the very structure of Hegel’s dialectic. Thus, the generation of a materialist dialectic requires modification of this structure, rather than a change in where the dialectic is applied.

Althusser’s argument presupposes some familiarity with Hegel’s thought, so before elaborating, it is useful to briefly summarize the Hegelian concepts which Althusser critiques. In particular, Hegel’s understanding of the nature of being is what is under scrutiny. This dialectic of being is laid out by Hegel in *Logic* and in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and can be roughly summarized thus:

For Hegel, being proceeds through three “moments” or “stages”...

1. **Being-in-itself (or immediacy):** First, we consider being on its own, isolated from all other being. On its own, being is featureless for Hegel. Thus it might seem that Hegel agrees in one sense with Immanuel Kant: that a being-in-itself—a being considered entirely on its own—cannot be known. However, Hegel believed a being-in-itself is unknowable for a different reason. Kant believed that the reason we cannot truly know a being-in-itself is because we cannot have direct access to it; the object’s features must pass through our perceptions and are inevitably modified in the process. For Hegel on the other hand, a being-in-itself cannot be known *because there is nothing to know about it*. Being considered on its own is completely empty and formless. Hegel thus posits an original identity of being and nothing. In this first “stage” of the dialectic, there is perfect unity, as there are not yet “things” to be differentiated from one another, but because of that, being is completely nondescript.

2. **Being-for-another (or mediation):** Though Hegel first posits that being *is nothing*, we know of course that in reality, things exist that can be differentiated from one another. Thus Hegel must get out of this simple identity of being and nothing somehow. The way he does so is through the notion of *becoming*. For Hegel, already at the moment of “being-in-itself,” already at the moment when we posit being at all, there is *implicit* in this a more determinate state of development. To say that a being exists at all implies determination; what a formless being has, “in-itself”—what a being “in-itself” is *becoming*, is determinate being. And critically, a being becomes determinate when it is brought into *relation* with other things. To say that i exist, for example, is to say that i am not something else. To say i have brown hair implies a relation to others, namely that i do not have red, black, or blond hair. To say i am a woman implies a relation to men, etc. In this second “moment” of the dialectic, being becomes differentiated. Different things exist, and they exist *through* their relations to other things. Being becomes *for another*. For Hegel this is also the appearance of subject and object. The object exists *for* the subject and thus the latter comes to dominate over the former.

3. **Being-in-and-for-itself (or mediated immediacy):** In the same sense that the moment of “being-for-another” negates the formlessness and emptiness of “being-in-itself,” “being-in-and-for-itself” negates the state of “being-for-another.” In this third moment of the dialectic, the domination of the object by the subject disappears. The subject is seen to be the alienated form of the object, and vice-versa. Things are differentiated from one another, but in the sense that they are different forms of a unified essence. This state can be equated to the realization of the “Absolute Idea,” a point which is never reached, but nevertheless the

dialectic describes the movement *toward* the realization of the “Absolute,” the ultimate identity of thought and being.<sup>2</sup>

Undoubtedly there are aspects of Hegel’s dialectic which Marx inherits, and those who are quite familiar with Marxist philosophy will recognize crucial aspects of Marx’s thought in this summary of Hegel. However, there are also components of Hegel’s dialectic that can be seriously critiqued—and indeed must be, if we want to free ourselves of idealism.

First, although it is a misconception that Hegel’s dialectic winds up in precisely the same place it starts from, we can still note that there is something rather circular about this structure. The starting point is a state of simple unity: being is nothing. We do pass through a moment of differentiation, where being becomes determinate through its relation to other beings. But this state is indeed a “moment”—it exists to be negated by a return to immediacy. This immediacy is (paradoxically) *mediated*, in the sense that being is no longer formless and empty, but different beings are simply the alienated forms of each other.

Second, because in this dialectic the future state is seen to be implicit in the prior state—which is why Hegel says that a seed is a “plant-in-itself,” and why “in-itself” (*an sich*) is sometimes translated as “implicit” in some translations of Hegel—the past is merely the shadow of the present, the present the realization of what was already implicit in the past. The whole development of a thing is seen to proceed from its simple beginnings; the motion of events is the *self-movement* of a simple contradiction.

Both of these related notions feed directly into Hegel’s concept of the “totality.” For Hegel, the totality is a unified whole made up of many contradictions. Applied to history and social science, a society or “social formation” is a totality in that it is a unity of many contradictions. On this level, the concept of “totality” is something Marx shares with Hegel. But for Hegel, the totality is an “organic whole,” meaning that all of the many contradictions and many determinations that make up the totality are in fact reflections of a unified essence: the totality itself, the “Idea,” the “Truth” of a particular period of time. As Althusser elaborates,

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**This truth emerges even more clearly from the *Philosophy of History*. Here again we encounter an *apparentoverdetermination*: are not all historical societies constituted of an infinity of concrete determinations, from political laws to religion via customs, habits, financial, commercial and economic regimes, the educational system, the arts, philosophy, and**

so on? However, none of these determinations is essentially *outside* the others, not only because together they constitute an original, organic totality, but also and above all because this totality is *reflected in a unique internal principle*, which is *the truth* of all those concrete determinations. Thus Rome: its mighty history, its institutions, its crises and ventures, are nothing but the temporal manifestation of the internal principle of the *abstract legal personality*, and then its destruction. Of course, this internal principle contains *as echoes* the principle of each of the historical formations it has superseded, but as echoes of itself – that is why, too, it only has one centre, the centre of all the past worlds conserved in its memory; that is *why it is simple...*

We have only to ask *why* Hegel thought the phenomena of historical mutation in terms of this *simple concept* of contradiction, to pose what is precisely *the essential question*. The simplicity of the Hegelian contradiction is made possible *only* by the simplicity of the *internal principle* that constitutes the essence of any historical period. If it is possible, *in principle*, to reduce the totality, the infinite diversity, of a historically given society (Greece, Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, England, and so on) to a *simple internal principle*, this very *simplicity* can be reflected in the contradiction to which it thereby *acquires a right*. Must we be even plainer? This reduction itself (Hegel derived the idea from Montesquieu), the reduction of *all* the elements that make up the concrete life of a historical epoch (economic, social, political and legal institutions, customs, ethics, art, religion, philosophy, and even historical events: wars, battles, defeats, and so on) to *one* principle of internal unity, is itself only possible on the *absolute condition* of taking the whole concrete life of a people for the externalisation-alienation (*Entausserung-Entfremdung*) of an *internal spiritual principle*, which can never definitely be anything but the most *abstract form of that epoch's consciousness of itself: its religious or philosophical consciousness, that is, its own ideology*. I think we can now see how the 'mystical shell' affects and contaminates the 'kernel' – for *the simplicity of Hegelian contradiction is never more than a reflection of the simplicity of this internal principle of a people, that is,*

***not its material reality but its most abstract ideology... It must be clear that all these arbitrary decisions (shot through though they are with insights of genius) are not just miraculously confined to Hegel's 'world outlook', to his 'system', but are reflected in the structure, in the very structures of his dialectic, particularly in the 'contradiction' whose task is the magical movement of the concrete contents of a historical epoch towards their ideological Goal.***<sup>3</sup> [Emphasis original]

In plainer terms, Hegel's reading of history superficially admits of the complexity of a social formation, its economic, political, ideological, cultural determinations, etc. But this complexity is effectively only a "moment" to be negated by the *reduction* of all of these determinations to an singular, internal principle. The development of a society is seen to be the self-movement of one, simple contradiction. *This* is what leads Hegel into speculative, idealist territory. And, as is hopefully somewhat clear now, this *reduction* of the complexity of society to a simple principle follows logically from the structure of the dialectic itself, where the present and future are implicit in the past, and where differentiation is only the (temporary) alienation of a singular, unified essence.

This discussion of Hegel may seem like a lengthy digression but here is the point: the economic reduction that is present in Marx's early works, in a substantial portion of Engels' work, and in the work of many subsequent Marxists is functionally identical to Hegelian idealism. The claim that Marx and Engels "inverted" Hegel's dialectic may be even more true than crude Marxists who repeat this phrase may realize—but it is true in the sense that having "inverted" Hegel's dialectic, economic-reductionist "Marxists" do nothing to alter the dialectic's *idealist* structure! In the economic-reductionist view, which seeks to explain all facets of society as if they must have some direct correspondence to economic practices, society is viewed as an *organic* totality in the same way as in Hegel's thought. Society is seen to be made up of many determinations and many contradictions, but each of these determinations is a reflection of an economic essence. All complexity is *reduced* to the self-movement of a simple contradiction: in the case of capitalism, the contradiction between capital and labor. In "inverting" the Hegelian dialectic, the terms change, but *conceptually* and in function the story is the same. The "mode of production" (in the narrow, economistic sense of the term) stands in for the "Idea," and Communism replaces the "Absolute Idea." History is the self-movement of humanity toward Communism, a "goal" already implicit in the present and even the in the past, and this motion is driven solely by the class contradiction.

This is why the “material” in a Marxist sense cannot be conflated with the “economic.” In reducing all things to economic terms in an effort to be very “materialistic,” economic reductionists ironically fall into the trappings of Hegelian idealism. The view in which all social phenomena are essentially the autodevelopment of the economic is just as useless as the notion that all of society is the product of the “Idea,” in no small part because the logic that justifies these views is the same. If there is to be a Marxist materialism (and we argue there is), this materialism must distinguish itself from the underlying reductionist logic present in Hegel and in much of the work of those claiming Marxism. Thereby, we must acknowledge that what is “material” can be other than economic, and can have its own logic which is not reducible to economic practice.

### **The “material” as the “pre-social”**

Perhaps the most nefarious misconception about Marxist materialism is that the “material” refers to that which exists independently of society, i.e. to that which is “pre-social.” Part of this argument already lies in shambles, for as we noted above, Marx spends most (effectively all?) of his time discussing things he clearly sees as socially constructed (to use the modern terminology). Meanwhile Marx is consistently dismissive of locating explanations for social phenomena at the level of the biology or chemistry or generally “pre-social” factors. Nevertheless, the idea of the “material” as that which exists prior to social relations is still somewhat common among those claiming Marxism.

Perhaps this concept persists in part because it can be closely related to the widespread economic reduction we just discussed. We noted that many claiming Marxism feel the urge to reduce things to economic terms in order to seem “materialistic,” but why? Apart from Marx’s own emphasis on political economy, one explanation might be that if the “material” means the “pre-social,” then a “materialist” in this sense may give preference to the economy. In the thinking of some claiming Marxism, the economy is foundational to the social formation, and/or all social phenomena are reflections of the “economic,” because the economy is what satiates human needs, which are biological, thus “pre-social,” thus “material.” Many followers of Marx, including Engels, posit that the starting point for Marx was the recognition of biological needs such as eating, and because the biological is the *starting point*, this is why the economy is seen as “determinate.” As Engels put it,

**Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; 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 on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of *vice versa*, as had hitherto been the case.<sup>4</sup>**

The simple “inversion” of Hegelian idealism is here justified by an appeal to the “pre-social” (i.e. the biological needs for food, water, shelter, etc.), and therefore purports to be “materialist.” We have already seen why it is nonsense to claim that a mere “inversion” of Hegelianism is materialist in any case. But we should still critique the notion that Marx saw the “economic base” as foundational because his starting point was, to put it crudely, human biology.

First, we can simply note the utter weakness of such a view. In the grand scheme of things, very little of human activity is devoted to the mere satiation of basic, biological needs. No one can deny that in order to survive, bodies need sustenance. But are social activities, even economic ones, really reducible to the production of such sustenance? Even the production of food cannot really be accounted for simply by an appeal to biology. The body can technically survive in extremely bare and harsh conditions. How do we explain hardly *anything* about the production of food as it *really happens* in society by pointing to the need for survival? The same could be said for the production of other necessities. The body may need protection from the elements in many types of conditions, but does the production of *t-shirts* really have much to do with survival? Moreover, as we all know, economic activity extends well beyond the production of food and other things which are considered necessities. For example, the production of computers and other electronics are clearly extremely important in the modern capitalist system. But surely no one has a biological need for a computer. If our view is that the economic is foundational purely because economies produce that which is biologically necessary to survive, we have a very limited model indeed, almost laughably so.<sup>5</sup>

In truth, in order to see the “economic base” as foundational at the level of the social formation, there is no need to appeal to anything “pre-social.” This is made fairly clear by Marx in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*:

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**Production, for its part, correspondingly furnishes the material and the object for consumption. Consumption without an object is not consumption; therefore, in this respect, production creates, produces consumption. But the object is not the only thing which production creates for consumption. Production also gives consumption its specificity, its character, its finish. Just as consumption gave the product its finish as product, so does production give finish to consumption. Firstly, the object is not an object in general, but a specific object which must be consumed in a specific manner, to be mediated in its turn by production itself. *Hunger is hunger, but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth. Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. Production thus creates the consumer. Production not only supplies a material for the need, but it also supplies a need for the material.*<sup>6</sup> [Emphasis added]**

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In other words, yes, people have bodies with certain needs that exist independently of society, but by itself this has little or no social significance for Marx. Even the most basic of needs, such as eating, cannot really be said to be “pre-social” because eating *as it really exists* in society is fundamentally mediated by social relations, it is a practice that is *produced*. Production—in this discussion in the *Grundrisse*, the predominant component of the “economic base”—*creates* needs (ranging anywhere from the need to eat to the need to have computers in an information-heavy society) which then must be satisfied with produced goods. *This* is why Marx views the economic as foundational, *not* because of an appeal to biology or anything “pre-social.”

The reason Marx is so adverse to appealing to the “pre-social” has to do with a fundamental component of Marx’s ontology. Although it is dangerous to over-read Hegelian categories onto Marxism, as we discussed above, it would also be a grave error to swing in the total opposite direction and claim that Marx inherited *nothing* from Hegel. One of the most

important things which Marx *does* draw from Hegel (though not without modification) is the notion that beings are determined through their *relations* with other beings. This ontological principle is clearly reflected throughout Marx's body of work. For instance, in *Wage Labor and Capital*, Marx writes, "A cotton-spinning machine is a machine for spinning cotton. Only under certain conditions does it become capital. Torn away from these conditions, it is as little capital as gold is itself money, or sugar is the price of sugar."<sup>7</sup> This notion also appears in Marx's more mature works, namely *Capital* vol. I: "[C]apital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons, established by the instrumentality of things."<sup>8</sup> For Marx this not only applies to categories of political economy but is a broader ontological principle. The relations in which something is engaged define what it is. When the "internal relations" which make up a phenomenon change, what that phenomenon *is* changes. When a thing is removed from the relations which define it, it ceases to be what it was.

We can even follow this dialectic farther than Marx cares to. A cotton-spinning machine ceases to be capital when it is removed from capitalist relations. But it remains a cotton-spinning machine because of another relation it is involved in: it is produced in order to spin cotton, and presumably in the society this machine is produced in, there is cotton to be spun. What happens when the cotton-spinning machine is torn from this relation, i.e. when it is torn from a society which produces cotton? It would remain an apparatus of some sort, but would cease to be a cotton-spinning machine. If this apparatus were placed in a society which produced no cotton and had no knowledge of the process of spinning cotton, it would clearly not be a cotton-spinning machine in that society. It would be something else: perhaps the society would find another use for it, or it would be an anomaly, or junk. The point is that, again, a cotton-spinning machine is only a cotton-spinning machine because of a particular relation it is involved in. And we could regress further. What would happen if a thing were to be torn from *all* relations (leaving aside that this would be impossible)? In Marx's dialectical framework, it would cease to be *anything*, or at least anything socially significant.

It is for this reason that Marx favorably quotes Spinoza's claim that "every determination is a negation." For Marx, all social categories are what they are because of the social relations in which they exist—those relations are *internal* to what social beings are. So, while it is true that in a Marxist framework, features such as anatomy or chemistry do exist materially, in absence of social relations these features do not have any social significance. To return to our earlier example, it is true that humans have bodies which require sustenance, but abstracted from social relations this means nothing for Marx. What we *are* is fundamentally marked by social relations; thus in a Marxist framework, any statement about how humans

are must be accompanied by an explanation of how we *came to be that way*, what social relations *produced* us in this way. This is why Marx is fairly unconcerned with the “pre-social”—in a dialectical, materialist framework, there is nothing really to say about the “pre-social,”

For these reasons, when a Marxist talks about the “material basis” for a thing, they cannot really be talking about something that exists prior to social relations. For a Marxist, the “pre-social” is an empty abstraction which cannot be sensibly treated as the “basis” for any social phenomenon. In truth, what is meant by a “material basis” is the set of social relations which are foundational to some feature of society or to some idea. The notion that something must exist independently of society to be “material” in the Marxist sense is frankly a horrendous misreading of what makes Marx’s thought—and Marxism in general—distinct and powerful.

### **What is Marxist materialism?**

The real meaning of the “material” within Marxism is broader but also simpler than any of the above conceptions. A materialist dialectic first of all posits that thought and being are unified, and that they interpenetrate (they influence each other), but also that they are *distinct*. Being exists outside of thought and the motion of being does not necessarily follow any law of the development of thought. The “material” is this being which exists external to thought and is distinct from thought. Anything which exists outside of thought is “material” in the Marxist sense.

This distinction might seem banal but it does actually matter (no pun intended). In positing a rudimentary distinction between the material world and the world of thought, we reject any necessary movement toward the identity of thought and being, and we help avoid the idealism of Hegel which viewed the external world as necessarily proceeding according to a development in thought. In short, the distinction between the material and thought allows us to recognize that we cannot just *think* our way toward communism, and it centers our own thoughts in a specific context, avoiding arrogant and transhistorical propositions.

Following from this, in a Marxist view, physical objects, their properties, our bodies, “nature,” etc. are all material, but so are social relations. And because a materialist dialectic posits that the *relations* in which something is engaged make that thing what it is, Marxists are principally concerned with social explanations for social phenomena. “Pre-social” categories *cannot*, in the Marxist ontology, be the basis for a social phenomenon. Thus in the

popular terminology, every facet of society is socially constructed for a Marxist. Yet, these social constructs are *also* material. They are not merely the product of “ideas,” as many claiming “social constructivism” would have it; rather these constructs exist external to our thoughts and independently of individual will. Class, race, sex/gender, nation, etc. are all *produced*, i.e. constructed, *and* they are material. This is what Marxist materialism means. Marxism supersedes the age-old struggle between idealism and “realism” and puts forward a powerful social ontology which recognizes the “reality” of social structures, at the same time that it posits that every one of these structures is *produced* and therefore can be radically transformed, right down to its very foundations.

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1. Karl Marx, “Economic Manuscripts: Capital Vol. I,” Chapter 1 section 4, *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed 10/23/2015, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4>; 
  2. I draw this summary from Carol Gould’s book, *Marx’s Social Ontology*. Though overall, I disagree with her reading of the *Grundrisse*, she does do an excellent job of summarizing Hegel’s dialectical system. See: Carol C. Gould, *Marx’s Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx’s Theory of Social Reality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978). 
  3. Louis Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed 10/23/2015, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1962/overdetermination.htm>; 
  4. Friedrich Engels, “Frederick Engels’ Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed 10/23/2015, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm>; 
  5. A thought experiment: imagine a society in which humans no longer needed to eat or drink, and could survive in any type of climate. Would this mean that there would be no economy? Certainly not. There would undoubtedly still be a huge amount of social activity not related to survival which would require production, i.e. economic activity, just like there is in the real world today. Moreover I highly doubt eliminating all basic biological needs would change anything about the relationship the economy has to the rest of society, in the sense of the economy being foundational. 
  6. Karl Marx, “Grundrisse 01,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed 10/23/2015, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm>; 
  7. Karl Marx, “Wage Labor and Capital, Chapter 5,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed 10/23/2015, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/ch05.htm>; 
  8. Marx, “Capital,” Chapter 33, *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed 10/23/2015, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch33.htm>; 

On Wed, Jan 17, 2018 at 3:09 AM, David Chevel <davidchevel@gmail.com> wrote:

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1. Graeber, David: On the Phenomena of Bullshit Jobs, Strikemag
2. Caless, Kit (VICE News); Fleming, Peter (CUNY): Your Job is Pointless; Cf. The Mythology of Work