

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THEORIZING MATERIALISM: A NECESSARY  
PRELIMINARY TO A CRITIQUE OF POST-COLONIAL  
MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

by  
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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Gabrielle Marie Magro for Master of Arts  
Major: Arab and Middle Eastern Studies

Title: Theorizing Materialism: A Necessary Preliminary to a Critique of Post-colonial Middle East Studies.

This thesis challenges the radical and dissident pretensions of post-colonial Middle East Studies. It begins with a critical characterization of the political deficiencies of post-colonialism, in which it is argued that post-colonialism is in fact an ideological supplement to liberalism. In the wake of Edward Said's Orientalism (taken as an instantiation of Foucauldian historicism) ostensibly critical intellectuals in Middle East Studies have increasingly engaged themselves in contestations over discourse and representation. This has turned ideological antagonism into a placeholder for any more fundamental political antagonism. The production of endless catalogues of identity and inventories of culture has only sustained the false notion that historical transformation in the Middle East is contingent upon the deconstruction and authentication of cultural subjectivities. Asserting a methodological link between the post-colonialists and the Young Hegelians, critiqued by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, this thesis argues that the political deficiencies of post-colonialism can be linked to the theoretical deficiencies of idealism. This link can only be articulated by materialist theory. Therefore, as a necessary preliminary to a politico-theoretical critique of post-colonialism, this thesis aims to investigate the conceptual basis of materialist theory. Through this endeavor, the aim is to conceptually substantiate the assertion that the antimony of materialism and idealism on the theoretical plane corresponds to that of revolution and liberalism on the political plane. In doing so, this thesis lays the theoretical foundation for a future political critique of post-colonial Middle East Studies, from a standpoint that is both objective and partisan.

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# CHAPTER 1

## THE POST-COLONIAL IDEOLOGY

### 1.1. A Statement of Hostilities

The historical significance of academic debates surrounding Occidentalism and Orientalism should be regarded now as something of a literary diversion. As this thesis will show, its political implications are liberal rather than radical, potentially reactionary rather than dissident. Over the last three decades or so, Marxian and post-Marxist academics in Middle East Studies have worked tirelessly to establish authentic standards for how Arabs are to be represented in Western discourse. Thirty years of profligate study of ‘Orientalism’ has produced yet another ‘post-conflict’ liberal programme, in which the high-minded demands of academic leftists (that Arabs be recognized as having rights, that Muslims be spared unfair vilification in the press, that the cultural diversity of the Middle East be preserved in the face of the crude stereotypes of the conservative and jingoistic patriots and enthusiasts of America’s war on terror) has progressed—counter-intuitively—in tandem with the occupation of Iraq, the NATO intervention in Libya, the ongoing expansion of settlements in the West Bank.

Thus the defense of Arab identity proceeds in a manner not unlike that of North American aboriginals whose cultural depth, voice and historiography was only truly recognized and given legitimacy in the academy *after* the utter strategic defeat of aboriginal resistance. Middle East Studies and its concerns about recovering voices and preserving identities gives one the fashionable feeling of wandering through a kind of classical imperial museum which was recently subjected to a post-modern architectural



renovation. Dangerous incongruities persist between the most well-intentioned and honest intellectuals who represent Arabs in academic discourse and the possibility of a violent overthrow of the *status quo*, to which they ultimately owe their social position.

To the truly critical student, the post-colonial project to deconstruct how Arabs are represented in Western discourse was deeply suspect. These debates (which had the veneer of progressive politics and liberal idealism) felt more like a distraction - or worse, an insidious outcome of hegemonic effects within the post-modern Academy. Bad philosophy had turned disenchanted Marxist, leftist and radical praxis into just so much literary and archival commentary. This diversion of intellectual energies to diffused, uncoordinated and incoherent research projects came under the guise of methodological and theoretical novelty, the charting of new academic territory.<sup>1</sup> This trend was driven by historicism and empiricism: trenchant enemies of Marxism. And through this increasingly fantastic search for new imaginaries, post-colonial academics were goaded on by the providential falsehood of a kind of redemption, an alleviation of imperial guilt that would supposedly flow from the restoration of the dignity and good standing of colonial cultures and peoples.

Immediately, one can draw a parallel between this academic tendency and a certain liberal ‘activist’ outlook in the United States especially surrounding the question of Palestine. Here, the post-colonial framework prescribed the recognition of the ‘other’, mutual understanding of cultural specificities and singularities, the endless storytelling

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<sup>1</sup> “The genius of Marx and Engels lies precisely in the fact that during a very long period, nearly half a century, they developed materialism, further advanced one fundamental trend in philosophy, did not rest content with repeating epistemological problems that had already been solved, but consistently applied—and showed how to apply—this same materialism in the sphere of the social sciences, mercilessly brushing aside as rubbish all nonsense, pretentious hotchpotch, the innumerable attempts to “discover” a “new” line in philosophy, to invent a “new” trend and so forth. ...” V. I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, 316.

of conflict resolution theory, the bringing together of Jew and Arab to talk, to engage in the peace process, to explore identity and suffering, in recognizing the exceptional, the nomadic, the subaltern. In reality, Palestine was disintegrating in the face of brutal military assault and massacre, infiltration and cooptation of its political representation, and the relentless expansion of state-sponsored Jewish settlements. If anything, academic knowledge generated under the intellectual aegis of post-colonial studies has done nothing for the colonized people of the Middle East except to offer its native intellectuals a seat in the cultural congresses of Europe and America, to paint a veneer of legitimacy on the Palestinian-Israeli 'peace process', to appoint its liberal interlocutors, and in so doing to fuel a nightmarish industry that ensures perpetual motion towards an endpoint that is best described as the opposite of effective peace. Worse still, the politics of toleration and self-determination of Muslims and Arabs has its philosophical origins in the same late nineteenth-century liberal doctrine which secures the Zionist ideology.

How are we to critique this diffuse tendency called post-colonialism, in a manner that is not merely polemical? The first option is to show that it is internally incoherent. This most certainly could be done, but we also want to critique post-colonialism from a political standpoint. Our problem with post-colonialism is fundamentally related to the politics of theory. What is then required is a conception of the relationship between theory and politics. The kind of methodology that would normally be prescribed in a typical academic-institutional setting would be some form of a sociology of knowledge, wherein we would map the field of Middle East Studies and then look for the various endogenous and exogenous factors that explain the dominance of post-colonialism. There are two problems with the sociology of knowledge approach. First, providing a detailed exposition of the social and historical

determinants of knowledge is not necessarily a *critical* explanation or analysis. Secondly, the social and historical determinants described in any sociology of knowledge remain un-conceptualized. It seems that a theoretical structure is required to articulate these concepts in the first place.

For the author of this thesis, a crucial moment in the evolution of this problematic was the realization that there was a very powerful connection to be made between the Young Hegelians and the post-colonialists – which had been made nowhere in the extant literature. In both cases, there is a political contestation between radical intellectuals. The claim herein is that the real politics of the Young Hegelians and post-colonialists is actually *liberal*, not emancipatory. Marx connected this political deficiency to idealism, and made the counter-assertion that materialism was the basis of revolutionary political thought.

This thesis proposes that before we embark on a detailed textual analysis and critique of post-colonial studies, that we properly establish a theoretical framework for critique. That framework is historical materialism.

## **1.2. Framing the Problematic: Materialism Contra idealism**

We are going to diagnose the problem of post-coloniality as idealism, and employ idealism as a conceptual apparatus locked in contestation with materialism. To do this we must understand idealism and put forth materialism as its alternative. The line between idealism and materialism is going to delineate radical scholarship from liberal scholarship, as well as that which is scientific from that which is pseudo-scientific. The question remains: how to go about linking this theoretical tendency (theoretical and epistemic idealism) with a politics which appears radical and is in fact liberal in a way that is rigorous and demonstrative rather than merely essayistic and

polemical. How can one connect materialism theoretically to revolution politically...?

A larger extrapolation of this preliminary study would go on to demonstrate in a definitive manner the permeation of idealist tendencies in Middle East Studies scholarship,<sup>2</sup> drawing out the underlying theoretical and political assumptions, and arguing for a return to a thoroughgoing materialism as the only consistent framework for radical theory and politics. Although other Marxist critiques of post-modernism and post-colonial criticism have been put forth, this problematization is unique in that it suggests that a rich comparison can be made between the post-colonial critics (and other elements of the contemporary “left” intelligentsia) and the Young Hegelians, both in terms of their underlying idealist conceptions of history and social change, and in terms of the material conditions that gave rise to these intellectual tendencies.

In the course of conducting research for this thesis, the form and intent of *The German Ideology* loomed ever larger in significance,<sup>3</sup> and certain key similarities became readily apparent between the Young Hegelians and the post-colonialists that we encounter today. Yet there are also important differences. The most important difference is that the Young Hegelians understood dialectical thinking. They had a definite conception of historical development, of progress, and of universal emancipation. The post-colonialists of today are not nearly as sophisticated as the Young Hegelians in the rigor of their thinking. The similarities between the post-colonialists and the Young Hegelians are most apparent at the level of politics. They

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<sup>2</sup> This would necessitate a far-reaching textual analysis that is beyond the scope of the present study. This study is concerned only with the first step of establishing the theoretical framework necessary for such an analysis, which might be entitled, in a Leninist vein, *Resurgent Idealism in Middle East Studies: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*.

<sup>3</sup> Marx and Engels. *Collected Works*. Volume 5: Marx and Engels 1845-1847. New York: International Publishers, 1976. (Includes *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*).

both share the same political intent: social and political transformation—an intent that is motivated by the same kind of naïve indignation<sup>4</sup> (outrage at oppressive social and political relations, whether in general, or in specific instances). They shared the following common assumptions: that their discourse is intrinsically emancipatory; that oppressive social and political relations are to be examined primarily at the level of discourse; that the discursive examination of these relations might lead to a better understanding of politics and would in turn have the normative effect of arousing sympathy for the oppressed; that this intervention at the level of discourse would lead to a change in discourse and consequently a changed discourse would transform politics for the better. In broad terms this is the idealism that we are identifying heuristically: 1) the tendency to grant explanatory primacy to concepts such as identity, culture, discourse, and representation, with the general consequence that 2) emancipatory politics appears to be a simple matter of changing identity, culture, discourse and representation through a contest of ideas and phrases. However, in order to ground this proto-heuristic within a theoretical perspective, and to guide its proper development, we must first seek out the philosophical grounding of materialism.

### **1.3. Questioning the Epistemic Basis and Political Valences of Historical Materialism**

This orientation towards ‘materialism’ began very much in the negative/critical moment of materialism: in a critique of the idealist fallacies of professional intellectuals who have thrived in a post-modern *milieu*. The idea that it was the Western episteme (and not capital interests, primitive accumulation, *etc.*) that was oppressing the people

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<sup>4</sup> “The futility and sentimentality of all the half-measures against the social evil of our day” and “a deep and genuine feeling of indignation at the infamy of what exists, revolutionary earnestness.” In: T.I. Oizerman, *The Making of the Marxist Philosophy*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, English translation 1981, 330 and 334.

of Middle East—and consequently that science must be abandoned—had disturbing implications, although it was greeted with enthusiasm by a kind of lapsed Marxism<sup>5</sup> which had lost its moorings and gravitated towards socially acceptable forms of critical theory, genealogy and anti-totalitarian commentary. And in any case, the critical moment of materialism alone is not sufficient to arrive at a theoretical grounding commensurate to the empirical task of analyzing historical post-coloniality. What is needed is an understanding of materialism as a positive theory of history<sup>6</sup> that is the correlate of an ‘emancipatory politics’—which we might define heuristically as a kind of social praxis that is both partisan and universal. In fact it was really with an immanent materialist critique of the idealist fallacies of post-colonialism that the present thesis took shape. To do that, one must start with some tentative idea of materialism, and indeed it seemed that real materialist thinking emerges through this critical moment, against the grain of idealism that is inherent in philosophy and theory and social science because of the nature of the conditions of knowledge production as a political and historical reality.

This thesis (which is a tentative search for the theoretical grounding of materialism that can ultimately serve as a foundation of a convincing critique of post-colonial studies) must strive to say something positive about materialist theory and politics. This obviously seemed a much more grandiose and severe task than the merely critical one. The beginning—in fact the fundamental task of philosophy is “...to show

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<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek sees post-modernism and post-colonialism as “de-materialized Marxism: revolutionary chic without revolution”, in the Introduction to *Lenin Reloaded: Toward a politics of truth*, ed. Budgen, Kouvelakis, and Žižek, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Materialism can seem impossibly difficult to grasp, “one of the most sensitive subjects [thèmes névralgiques] in philosophy”... “the hardest question of all”. Althusser 1994, *Sur la philosophie* (transl. Schuting), Paris: Gallimard, 94, 56.

that we must choose. [...] A philosophical situation consists in the moment when choice is elucidated.”<sup>7</sup> This thesis, with Marx, will argue that the antinomy between reform (liberal, bourgeoisie) and revolutionary politics coincides on the philosophical plane with the difference between idealism and materialism. In so doing this thesis aims to properly delineate some boundaries and specificities of materialism, through such questions as:

- What does an epistemic commitment to science entail in the study of history, society, politics?
- Is a science of history possible? What are the real material conditions of possibility for such a science? Is it linked, for example, to a particular subject-position?
- How does this materialist science of history and society differ from the present constitution of the social sciences in Middle East Studies, with particular reference to the association of objectivity with value-neutrality?
- In what sense is materialist science partisan (what is the modern corollary to the Soviet question of ‘proletarian science’ versus ‘bourgeois science’)? How is one to work out that combination: partisanship and science/truth?
- What is the materialist conception of partisanship? And how does this materialist partisanship relate to commonplace conceptions of morality? How are we to materialize concepts like emancipation and resistance? How are we to tune our political compass to materialism, and not to a mere ‘radical’ moral aesthetic?
- How does the materialist study of history and society inform our politics? What does it mean to be a materialist in politics? How can we avoid the accusations of social engineering and totalitarianism? What are the prospects for a politics of truth?

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<sup>7</sup> Badiou and Žižek. *Philosophy in the Present*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, 15.

Because this is a thesis in CAMES, we are considering a case study in area studies of the Middle East. Yet this research (which is better defined as Marxist political theory and philosophy) can be applied not only to Middle East Studies but to any sub-discipline of the social sciences and humanities endemically effected by the post-colonial programme, such as ‘third-world’, ‘subaltern’, ‘indigenous’ or ‘literary’ studies. With regard to the post-colonial programme, theorizing materialism is also a recommencement of the debates of the Second and Third Internationals, a re-engagement with Marxist analysis of imperialism and anti-colonial struggles. The challenge remains a scientific one: the identification of real antagonisms—the real conflicts at play—against the indigenist or culturalist notions of struggle and academic professions of solidarity with the oppressed that arise from it. Otherwise, post-coloniality will have succeeded in diluting all of the Marxist anti-colonialists like Fanon (and even Edward Said), reducing their thought to a brand of culturalism and identity politics acceptable to polite academic discourse and inane liberal idealism.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, capitalism is scarcely mentioned today in Middle East Studies, if ever, as the study of the Middle East has been reduced to the cataloguing of culture, knowledge, identity and discourse.

#### **1.4. Delving Into Materialism**

In *The German Ideology*, we have the Young Hegelians, a group of philosophers who had politicized Hegel’s philosophy of history, believing that their development of a Hegelian political discourse constituted a breakthrough in revolutionary practice. The prevalent characteristic of this supposedly earth-shattering

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<sup>8</sup> See Wallerstein, Immanuel. “Reading Fanon in the 21st Century.” *New Left Review* 57 (May/June 2009), 117-125.



discourse was that one could change the world by changing ideas, by enlightenment, or through education and knowledge:

According to their fantasy, the relations of men, all their doings, their fetters and their limitations are products of their consciousness . . . The Young-Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly “world-shattering” phrases, are the staunchest conservatives . . . [because] they forget . . . that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are combating solely the phrases of this world.<sup>9</sup>

Marx had found in the apparent radicalism of the Young Hegelians, the persistence of theology in an apparent secular form—a kind of post-critical absolutism.

Like the Young Hegelians, Marx gleaned from Hegel the possibility of harnessing a conjunction of rationality (systemic thought) and emancipation. He had shared with Hegel the conception of the development of history in stages, in leaps and not gradually, dialectical thinking, immanent critique, progress and emancipation. However, the political inference that we change the world by changing ideas was completely wrong. Marx called it ‘ideological’, making several remarks to suggest they were getting it upside down, seeing the world in reverse. These remarks have mostly led to confusion over the conception of ideology, most of which itself has been ideological in the precise sense of the word meant by Marx. Marx was not arguing that the purely economic should replace the purely ideational in the development of social and political thought—although this facile accusation is still hurled at Marxist intellectuals today by their many meta-theoretical adversaries.

Rooting this preliminary critique of post-coloniality in the problematic of *The German Ideology* will allow us to go on to defend some of the minimal specifications of materialism by developing the conceptual apparatus of materialist theory. Indeed it is the penultimate aim of Chapter 2 to develop a theoretical framework for the materialist

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<sup>9</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 30.

concept of ‘partisanship’. This will stage Chapter 3, which contrasts materialism (with its theoretical commitment to rationality and emancipation) to Foucauldian historicism (the most theoretically advanced hyper-empiricist form of Nietzschean perspectivism extant in social and political thought in the Academy). We will explore how Foucault’s theory intrinsically nullifies emancipatory politics. While Foucault silently appropriates an emancipatory dialogue (*i.e.* he is notionally on the side of the imprisoned, the sexual deviants, *etc.*) his rejection of systemic thought—which he identifies as the cause of repression (*i.e.* he denounces meta-historical narratives, universality and all claims to truth)—makes his politics arbitrary rather than theoretically justified. Without any framework for judging politics better or worse, without a philosophical elucidation of choice, how can one justify being on the side of the oppressed? Further, is it possible that by writing about the genealogies of power that one is only re-enacting *status quo* power relations and doing nothing, in fact, to change it...? Is one merely writing the given history of ideas, even if masterfully, in any given instance (the history of madness, sexuality, *etc.*) and therefore perpetrating a very elaborate and historicized form of empiricism which focuses primarily on ideational extrapolation?<sup>10</sup>

### **1.5. A Note on Ideology**

‘Ideology’—although it is commensurate with idealism—must be defined along multiple axes. We introduce ideology separately because it is crucial to the politics of theory. We have really designed the term ‘idealism’ to describe formal structures of thought such as theory. Ideology then has broader usage. When Marx used

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<sup>10</sup> The reader will bear in mind that it is our contention that post-coloniality is the result of a reading of Foucauldian historicism interposed into Middle East area studies in the post-modern Academy via central texts such as Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.

the term ‘ideology’ he was referring to philosophical idealism—the lineage of philosophy that began with Hegel. The reason that ideology is an innovative concept that goes beyond idealism is because it specifically describes the political function and effect of idealism.<sup>11</sup>

Marx’s ideology critique was a very new form of critique. It is technically called immanent or ‘dialectical critique’. Marx was embedded within the German tradition of critical thought, political economy and the utopian socialism of his day. The utopian socialists believed that their relentless critique was eminently radical precisely because it drove down into the deepest basis of thought itself. Even as Marx came from this tradition of critique he changed it by revealing its limitations. This is important to point out because all radicals and leftists have retained this sense of the imperative to generate relentless criticism of existing things either in reality or thought—and yet have forgotten, abandoned or down-played the theoretical foundation of critique (the theory in ‘critical theory’).

What Marx actually meant by ‘ideology’ was philosophical idealism, and by reversing philosophical idealism, Marx was saying that the social and the historical are primary—and *not* the ideal. Thereafter he arrived at a new materialist conception of history (although not as yet a science) and his first claim after developing his immanent critique was to ascribe philosophical idealism to the division between manual and mental labor. At hand we have three important observations: 1) the antagonism between materialism and idealism, 2) the conception of ideology and dialectical critique, and 3) the materialist conception of history, towards the materialist theory of historical materialism. All three of these observations will be important for the purpose of

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<sup>11</sup> For an extended Marxist study of the concept of ‘ideology’ see Eagleton, Terry, *Ideology: An Introduction* (Verso 1991).

critiquing post-colonialism—but especially 1) and 2). Following Marx, we see that the actual political effects of post-coloniality are quite different from what it presumes to do. This is the trademark of ideology: some sort of contradiction between appearance and reality, between what a discourse says and what it does, between a theorist's political intent, and the *de facto* political thrust of discourse. It is in moving between the level of theory and the level of actual reality that ideology critique proceeds. The point is always to show that there are social and historical determinations that have not been taken into account. So we begin with the theory, and point out this contradiction, and then determine which social and historical determinations have not been taken into account. Theoretically, this could mean that in failing to take these determinations into account, there is insufficient knowledge of reality, and hence the theorist was incapable of understanding how her own discourse would be used. So not only was it a dead letter with regards to radical politics, it was actually an accomplice of liberal politics. What is really at stake here is the relationship between base and superstructure, or between discourse and real politics. When we are speaking about ideology at the level of superstructure, we are talking about the contradiction between subjective political intent and effective political practice. This holds true for the theorist as a political subject. She may have the genuine intent to be emancipatory, but because of an incomplete knowledge of political reality, she somehow misses the mark.

Thus far we are prepared to confront this phenomenon at the level of its theoretical and political justification but the most damning thing about ideology is that nothing can really be salvaged from it: it is not a matter of adroitly shifting analytical frames. For instance, the post-colonial ideology cannot be remedied by making it epistemology reflexive (*e.g.* through auto-ethnography, literary criticism, deconstructivism, *etc.*). There is a leap, a fundamental break between ideology and real

knowledge/science. Ideology can be explained as a phenomenon within the context of a new science, but from within ideological thinking, one cannot really shift perspective. Realizing this was a true moment of realization for Marx, who recognized suddenly that the Young Hegelians were ensconced in studying the ideational, and not the material, and that this was the root of the problem. The solution was not to refine and hone their idealism. Rather, Marx realized that he needed to start anew. For Marx, this moment yielded the materialist conception of a science of history. Interestingly, right away, he would ground the phenomenon of ideology in his emergent theoretical conception of social position vis-à-vis the division of labor. From this standpoint, Marx was able to objectivize ideology, something that the ideologists themselves were unable to do, and to explain its contradictions. From within historical materialism, one can make the transformation from ideology into something objective; this transformation is impossible within idealism itself.

For the purpose of ideology critique, one does not have an aprioristic ‘positive’ conception of materialism—this is particularly so at the level of critique, as the antagonism between materialism and idealism is then only relational. In this relational antagonism, materialism is always ahead of idealism because it is more reflexive. Materialism contains idealism. When we critique idealism we are pointing out one way in which it is not adequately reflexive vis-à-vis the relationship between theory and reality. So ideology critique is always about idealism, and it is always a contestation between idealism and materialism, and it is about reflexivity vis-à-vis the relationship between theory and reality. Materialism is always more reflexive than idealism. This antagonism is ultimately encapsulated in a Marxist theory of knowledge.

## 1.6. Marx and the Post-Colonial Ideology

Post-coloniality is a theoretical project that appears to be radically partisan. It has an ostensible understanding of its enemies: authority, power, empire, meta-history, colonization, objectivization, *etc.* ‘Power’ in a post-colonial framework is construed as a discourse which makes a claim to truth, authority, stability and certainty—such as the civilizing mission of Empire, the providential hubris of *Pax Britannica*, the construction of the ‘other’ via the literary and scientific discourses of Orientalism, and even the (supposed) denigration of the pre-industrial native in Marx’s analysis of colonialism. Conversely, the ‘disempowered’ in Foucauldian post-coloniality are granted a sort of kinetic potential to destabilize, dislocate, disrupt ‘power’. Their ‘history’ is articulated not as ‘truth’ but in a way that deconstructs power and suspends truth claims through the inscription of multiple subjectivities which present as exceptions (outside of and different from the normalizing and regulating way in which society has constructed meaning). Genealogy appeared to be a dissident activity. As this mode of knowledge production was circulated in the Academy, it became apparent that post-coloniality’s political derivative was not dissident anti-authoritarianism but ‘identity politics’—in fact, a very inane form of liberalism focused on individual self-expression confined to a political horizon of reform and enfranchisement. The mercenary appropriation of Foucault in post-colonial studies (and via Said’s own travelling misappropriation of Foucault in *Orientalism*) has brought out the full implication of a latent academic fidelity to liberal individualism. As an ideological dimension of this liberal cult of self-expression (subjectivity as radical cultural exception/challenge to the discourse of the powerful) many post-colonial scholars have cultivated a sense of being on the side of the oppressed, of adopting all kinds of sentimental gestures and lifestyle options in a

way that Hussein (in a Saidian vein) cleverly encapsulates in the term ‘filiation’.<sup>12</sup> In this endless cataloguing of the cultural spaces of exception, post-colonialists try to create a relationship between subjectivity and the real, but they do so through arbitrary cultural identification, in taking up and promoting the identities of various oppressed groups at the margins and in the discursive hinterland of imperialism. They do so in a very empirical fashion, having shunned systematicity, and are therefore left with emancipation without foundation, or emancipation isolated completely within one specific discourse or genealogy: sexual deviancy, prisoners, Muslims, women, subalterns, aboriginals, *etc.* Because the post-colonial academic’s claim to authentic portrayal resides completely within the framework of a subjectivity (rather than a collective or systemic subjectivity such as ‘class’ – see below) they can only track the outcome of particular power struggles. It is unclear on what theoretical basis any particular filiation can be defended, and by what philosophical mechanism one could judge the politics of filiated groups. In other words, from a Foucauldian standpoint, what is the theoretical basis for taking sides? Genealogical method is an empirical exercise which has no consistent application or framework for judgment. Is it then a sheep in wolf’s clothing?<sup>13</sup> Is it dissident only in the formal sense that it declares itself to be challenging discourses of power, but in the end, only re-confirms those discourses by implicitly accepting the demotic sphere of liberal rights as the principal site of all identity contestation? As Žižek reminds us, “More than ever, one should bear in mind

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<sup>12</sup> Hussein, Abdirahman A. Edward Said: *Criticism and Society*. New York: Verso, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 23. “The first volume of the present publication has the aim of uncloaking these sheep, who take themselves and are taken for wolves; of showing that their bleating merely imitates in a philosophic form the conceptions of the German middle class; that the boasting of these philosophic commentators only mirrors that wretchedness of the real conditions of Germany.”

Walter Benjamin's reminder that it is not enough to ask how a certain theory (or art) declares itself to stay with regard to social struggles—one should also ask how it effectively functions IN these very struggles.”<sup>14</sup>

In its valorization of radical multiplicity, singularity, discontinuity and hybridity, post-coloniality has made the study of anything which cuts across these highly localized and exceptional ethno-cultural categories entirely impossible: ‘class’ and ‘capitalism’ are reduced to dubious discursive gestures and ‘progress’ or ‘emancipation’ are rendered *perspectival* rather than *universal*. Any grounding for judgment would seem impossible within a space of multiple irreducible perspectives. There is no measure of things; only deconstruction, in which meaning is suspended in a nexus of power and knowledge. This is ultimately not radical at all, but a kind of weak liberalism given a post-modern dressing up in which the endless search for identities that are objectivized by or excluded from narrative power-structures amounts to a kind of bland assertion of rights based on the very framework of liberal multiculturalism which dissidents claim to oppose. Post-modern academic dissidence has succeeded in reducing politics to a relativistic narrative contestation, and has rejected as rational truth-claims as ‘Western’. This presumption precludes any kind of judgment. Power is read as a discursive phenomenon and universal claims to truth are deconstructed, but this seems to only re-entrench the ontological primacy of the liberal rights-bearing subject in the sense that law, culture, diplomacy, ethics, morality, *etc.* is admitted to be the very discourse which defines the speaking subject.<sup>15</sup> When post-coloniality reveals the disempowered to be precisely those who are denied liberal rights, have these post-

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<sup>14</sup> *In the Introduction to Lenin reloaded: toward a politics of truth*, ed. Budgen, Kouvelakis, and Zizek, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> See Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Vintage, 1982. (especially Part IV “Archaeological Description”).



modernists not re-inscribed the very system which their non-systematicity has avowedly rejected?<sup>16</sup> Because there are manifold instances of non-recognition of identity-based citizenship throughout the history of the liberal democracies, post-coloniality has manifested its attention by cataloguing these spaces of exception as discursive sites of contestation. This has been the central concern of post-Marxist cultural history as much as it has been the concern of every other brand of post-colonial studies. Ironically, these post-modern disciplines have ultimately conceded the liberal framework and operate entirely within its parameters and boundaries. Disguised as radical anti-capitalism, anti-Westernism, anti-imperialism, *etc.*, these Foucauldian forms of social deconstructivism function in reality as a kind of liberal reformism. Deconstruction provides a pseudo-methodology as an ostensible discursive ‘opening’ for the oppressed by chipping away at the validity of the reigning discourse of power. In this way, we should see academic cultivation of ‘fragmentation’ and ‘nomadism’ not as a profound challenge to empire but rather a self-regulating ideology which works to prevent the emergence of true historical block—by confining the scope of conflict to narrow, ethno-cultural narrative contestations. Worse, it is difficult to see how this is anything other than an attempt at enfranchisement. It reduces politics to a discursive challenge made by a specific ethno-cultural group to the dominant narratives of power which are imagined to regulate enfranchisement. Hegemonic culturalism/identitarianism in post-colonial studies subverts the possibility of any kind of real solidarity or universality in the same way that an ideology of pacifism prevents the utilization of violence as a form of effective resistance—all the while masquerading as a vehicle for dissidence. Hegemonic post-modern culturalism and pacifism are ideologies which denude politics of its

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<sup>16</sup> We are arguing that post-coloniality is a sub-species of post-modernism. See Appiah, Kwame Anthony, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” *Critical Inquiry*, 336–57.

revolutionary potential. They reduce every struggle to that of a specific and highly individual ethno-cultural group's efforts to be recognized (read enfranchised) within the demotic sphere of liberal rights. This fragmentation has encouraged the concomitant emergence of gender studies, ethnic and transnational studies, diaspora studies, subaltern studies, Islamic studies, cultural studies, literary studies, *etc.* Further, it is unclear if anything progressive can happen when previously oppressed groups become 'empowered' ... do they not then reproduce the same forms of oppression to which they were once subjected? Is this not a shift rather than a political transformation?<sup>17</sup> Is there any true progress (read: emancipation) in this panoply of individual identitarian contestations?

The basis for such a critique (more fully developed in Chapter 3) resides, as stated above, in Marx's reading of the ideology of the Young Hegelians. The core of ideology is the following contention: that there is a discrepancy between what a discourse says it does, or is intended to do, and what it actually does. This is about the relationship between theory (or discourse) and actual political reality.

We chose to begin, as Marx did in *The German Ideology*, in a contestation over revolutionary theory. For Marx, it was the Young Hegelians. For us, it is the post-colonialists. This is to say that we are arguing with other mental laborers, who, in politics, favor the left, and who explicitly politicize their theoretical work. We are not primarily concerned with contemporary social scientists (for which the idea of partisan theory is an abomination from the start). To begin, we have the assertion of partisan

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<sup>17</sup> A way to think of this is if there is always an identitarian underclass, even if decade to decade the specific cultural placeholder changes from Blacks to the Irish, to the Mexicans, to the Muslims, as each are vilified in turn, then enfranchised. Similarly, when homosexuals (through identity politics) achieve the right to marry... yet has society truly *progressed*? Have homosexuals not simply reproduced conservative class dynamics while we have said nothing for polyamorous families and their 'struggle for recognition'?

theory as something which legitimately exists, and over which there is presently a contestation. That contestation takes the form of idealism *contra* materialism.

The philosophical idealism Marx was responding to had two parts: a political discourse (that of the Young Hegelians), and a theory of historical development (Hegel). The former was to be rendered as ideology, and the latter as philosophical idealism. In place of the former, we would substitute ‘partisanship’, and in the latter, the ‘social sciences’. In this study, ‘idealism v. materialism’ in the first instance can be taken as parallel to ‘liberalism v. revolution’ when we are dealing primarily with ideology and subjectivity. When there is a given explicit normative intent (such as radical intervention) alignment between that explicit intent (an emancipatory subjectivity) must be adjudicated against the actual political effect (which may be merely liberalism, as described above).

‘Idealism v. materialism’ in the second instance can be taken as parallel to ‘reactionary v. revolutionary’ when we are dealing with science, rationality and objectivity. Here, truth is at stake. Reactionary approaches suppress the normative. Value-neutrality is a kind of idealism which claims to undertake the dispassionate observation and analysis of data merely as it is found in nature. In this system (social science) ‘what is’ severely delimits ‘what can be’—a move which subverts revolutionary possibility and replaces politics with a management science of social control (the ‘policy’ which under-writes the welfare state is an example of the real political correlates of this kind of idealism).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Against mainstream social sciences, post-coloniality also mounts an attack when it challenges the neutrality of theory but it does so by rendering all theoretical discourse subjective, and advancing its own subjective intervention into analysis of a specific political conflict. Against Marxism, post-coloniality focuses on discourse—in Marxist terms it is a methodology which focuses entirely on the superstructure. Even the finest and most convincing description of a superstructural effect will be distorted and misleading if it is disconnected from its real material moorings.

Next we have a break from political (ideological) sentiment to partisanship, and also from philosophical idealism *qua* understanding to materialist science *qua* revolution. We can divide these into two discrete moments, and say one is about knowledge, and the other is about partisanship. Having mapped these movements to social science and post-modernity in general, we can now turn to Foucauldian post-coloniality—again, in parallel to Marx’s critique of the Young Hegelians.

The similarities between the post-colonialists and the Young Hegelians are most apparent at the level of politics. They both share the same political intent: social and political transformation. That intent is motivated by the same moral sentiment: outrage at oppressive social and political relations, whether in general, or specific relations. In both cases, there is this declarative belief that their discourse is intrinsically emancipatory. In both cases, oppressive social and political relations are examined primarily at the level of discourse. In both cases, the characterization of these relations might lead to better understanding, and also to the arousal of sympathy for the oppressed. In both cases, the political consequence is that change at the level of discourse can lead to transformation of oppressive social and political relations. We are going to characterize both of these discourses heuristically as idealist. This means that explanatory primacy is given to things like identity, culture, discourse, and representation, with the general consequence that emancipatory politics appears to be a matter of changing ideas.

Because conflict appears to be at the level of identity, (identity politics) post-coloniality focuses on identity and seems to have unwittingly reproduced the liberal framework through dynamics suspiciously akin to multi-culturalism and toleration. For example, the act of voicing Muslim identity through post-colonial studies can be read as an attempt at the political subjectivization and empowerment of Muslims within the

framework of liberal toleration. This isn't a particularly difficult or risky endeavor. Post-colonial intellectuals appear as (and even believe themselves to be) champions of 'oppressed' or 'misunderstood' groups like Muslims and seek to alleviate their oppression. In reality (although they would never admit it) they are appealing to liberal sentiment. When Muslims themselves (or Arab post-colonial intellectuals) assert their narrative voice and cultural identity they are engaging liberalism at the level of its most hallowed and widely-accepted assumptions: such as freedom of religion, individual rights, self-determination, *etc.* The status of Muslims (or Arabs) within Euro-American public intellectual circles vastly increases under these conditions. The inclusion of native intellectuals in western universities is also an important boon to liberal multiculturalism.<sup>19</sup> As nativist narratives are asserted and tolerated, liberalism has gained traction, and intellectuals have gained status. It is not clear how this has translated into emancipation. In taking their main task to be the assertion of cultural or religious identity that are essentially re-inscribing the same Oriental/Occidental dichotomy they ostensibly oppose, conceding that all along it really *was* a clash of civilizations. Liberalism is then taken implicitly as the mechanism of democratic reform that will rectify the present state of things. We should keep in mind that the widespread success of diaspora Palestinian intellectuals of liberal persuasion has done little to end the Israeli military occupation—and perhaps has even perpetuated it in part through the growth and endowment of the academic dimension of the peace process industry which is invested heavily in the continuation of the conflict. It seems obvious that the only Arabs assisted by deconstructivism and identity politics are those in privileged positions in the West in corporate and professional networks defined by class interests—which is

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<sup>19</sup> See Dirlik, Arif, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism", *Critical Inquiry* 20(2) (Winter 1994): 328-356.

to say the elite. The Arabs left in Iraq and Afghanistan and Palestine are betrayed by those who supposedly share the same ethno-cultural ‘identity’, and when they do actually resist in ways that are meaningful—such as armed resistance—we inevitably have the play between good Arab and bad Arab, between acceptable and unacceptable forms of political resistance. Finally, it seems that in post-structural deconstructivism, power relations can always be displaced onto some other more local instance: Arab can become Palestinian, Palestinian can become Christian, Christian can become Jerusalemite, Jerusalemite can become woman, woman can become lesbian, lesbian can become prisoner, *etc.* a Library of Babel of endless political subjectivities. More generally, because post-coloniality is only concerned with a local context, and not within a larger system of oppression, even in the best case scenario, exploitation and oppression will only be transferred onto some other local context rather than being connected to the universal. As Slavoj Žižek observed, “Let’s go on changing something all the time so that, globally, things will remain the same!”<sup>20</sup>

Whether we are dealing with the Young Hegelians, or, today, with post-colonialists, our immanent critique is the beginning of a Marxist theory of knowledge. Following Marx, later thinkers would take this up, and define which social position would be linked to subjectivity and objectivity in a sort of Leninist matrix.<sup>21</sup> In this, the relationship between idealism and materialism is either relational; it examines whether the objective or the subjective predominates. In this case, it is really just epistemological, as it was for Althusser. Or, it has more definite content, and is ontological, which is the case for Lenin and today for Alain Badiou. In either case,

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<sup>20</sup> Žižek, *Lenin Reloaded*. Afterword, 170.

<sup>21</sup> See Toscano, Alberto, “Partisan Thought.” In: *Historical Materialism* 17(2) (2009): 175-191.

familiarizing ourselves with this level of analysis is necessary in order to link real social and historical determinations with epistemology. This might be related to something like class position, such that intellectuals as a class are incapable of being revolutionary because of their social position. The point is, we are talking about real determinations of reflexivity. Marx never provided an account of why he had surpassed Hegel and the philosophers in being able to recognize the foundational idealist tendencies of their thinking when he wrote *The German Ideology*. And it does not seem that Marx questioned their revolutionary intent. He was certainly not deriding them in a vulgar sense as merely “bourgeois intellectuals”. *Class had not yet even been developed as a concept.*

At this point he calls philosophical idealism ‘ideological’. This is because the philosophers had failed to think reflexively about the real conditions of the production of philosophy. Marx’s philosophical critique of the Young Hegelians did not lead to him at once to a materialist theory of knowledge, for he had not turned to the question of epistemology. There is a *caesura* between his immanent critique of the Young Hegelians and his discovery of materialist science. He had seen the Young Hegelians politicize Hegel in advancing the standard that the world would be changed by changing ideas, and he saw that this was all wrong. He believed, like Hegel, in the development of history, the stages of history, and dialectical leaps, but something was wrong in the politicization of Hegel’s philosophy of history. What was wrong was the question of *dialectics*, and whether the subjective or the objective dominated the movement of history. This was not about epistemology. It was about what would later be rendered base vs. superstructure, or the determination of the economic in the last instance. But as soon as he recognized that the dialectic was reversed, he did not work on developing the dialectic, but went directly to working out a theory of the development of history

through capital. In *The German Ideology*, he sketches the materialist conception of history, and a major thread running through this is the division of labor. While he was critiquing philosophical idealism, he put forward dialectical critique as a useful way to discredit a discourse which says one thing and does another. This discourse might be a competing vision of progress and emancipation or it might be some other kind of political discourse. The challenge was to find a contradiction between what the theory says it is politically, and what it actually does politically.

In the manner of dialectical critique, Marx's materialist contestations against the philosophical idealism of the Young Hegelians would have to be *theoretically* formulated, wherein philosophical idealism is revealed to be not universal, but a socio-historically contingent subjectivity. Marx's superior theory should then have the capacity to articulate that subjectivity, and reveal its real politics from the standpoint of truth and emancipation. Central to this critical project is Marx's innovative theoretical concept of ideology. Ideology critique is a fundamentally new kind of immanent critique, because the manner of ideology critique is to find a disjuncture between what a discourse explicitly claims it is practically doing, and what it is effectively doing in reality. In other words, the disjuncture is between theory and some conception of social and political *practice*. While ultimately ideology critique is meant to reveal political debilities in thought, underlying these political debilities is always a theoretical deficiency, which can be conceptualized as a failure of the explanatory capacity of theory, or through a conception of *scientific* knowledge. Underlying this conception of ideology is hence a conception of materialist theory and of idealist theory.

In this thesis, we are going to diagnose the problem of post-coloniality as idealism, and employ idealism as a conceptual apparatus locked in contestation with materialism. To do this we must understand idealism and put forth materialism as its



alternative. The line between idealism and materialism is going to delineate radical scholarship from liberal scholarship, as well as that which is scientific from that which is pseudo-scientific. Of course, the question remains: how to go about linking this theoretical tendency (theoretical and epistemic idealism) with a politics which appears radical and is in fact liberal (and potentially reactionary) in a way that is rigorous and demonstrative rather than merely essayistic and polemical. How can one connect materialism theoretically to revolution politically...?

## CHAPTER 2

### ON MATERIALISM

“As a mass, the intellectuals, on the contrary, even those whose ‘professional’ concern it is, (specialists in the human sciences, philosophers), have not really recognized, or have refused to recognize, the unprecedented scope of Marx’s scientific discovery, which they have condemned and despised, and which they distort when they do discuss it. With a few exceptions, they are still ‘dabbling’ in political economy, sociology, ethnology, ‘anthropology’, ‘social psychology’, etc., etc., even today, one hundred years after *Capital*, just as some Aristotelian physicists were still ‘dabbling’ in physics, fifty years after Galileo. Their ‘theories’ are ideological anachronisms, rejuvenated with a large dose of intellectual subtleties and ultra-modern mathematical techniques.”

Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, p.4.

#### 2.1. Introduction: Reasserting Materialism

In the first chapter, we advanced a critical characterization of post-colonial political thought, arguing that it is but another permutation of liberal thought (and not even *enlightened* liberal thought), not, as post-colonialists apparently believe, to be some novel kind of radical thought that offers new hope for the oppressed. The political deficiencies of post-colonial thought were linked to the underlying assumption that a program for undermining the ideational foundations of society is implicitly emancipatory. That enabled us to link up with Marx’s critique of the Young Hegelians in *The German Ideology*, since the central point was the same: “The Young-Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly ‘world-shattering’ phrases, are the staunchest conservatives . . . [because] they forget . . . that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are combating solely the phrases of this world.”<sup>22</sup> Taking Marx’s lead, the political deficiencies of post-colonial thought were taken to be

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<sup>22</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 294.

symptomatic of the persistence of philosophical idealism in contemporary theory—a diagnosis which carried with it the prescription for the reassertion of materialism in the present conjuncture. Our critical imperative was hence framed as materialism contra idealism, with the underlying thesis that the theoretical distinction between materialism and idealism corresponds to the political antinomy between revolutionary politics and liberal/reform politics.

In the first chapter, the difference between materialist theory and idealist theory was not rigorously formulated. Rather, historical materialism—which Marx theoretically formulated after he had written *The German Ideology*—was advanced provisionally, taken to be characteristic in some crucial regard of materialist theory generally, and adequate to serve as the materialist antagonist of post-colonialism. Its superiority was alleged to be both ‘epistemic’ in its explanatory capacity (and crucially in its capacity to provide an account of the ideological uses of post-colonialism in the context of neoliberalism), as well as ‘political’, in that it does not lend itself to ideological appropriation in the same way that post-colonialism does.

While historical materialism is an able antagonist to post-colonialism, ever pointing to the explanatory primacy of the economic over the discursive, casual familiarity with the basic tenants of historical materialism is hardly enough to safeguard our basic thesis, or to robustly delineate the specificity of materialist theory. In regards to our basic thesis—that the theoretical distinction between materialism and idealism corresponds to the political antinomy between revolutionary and liberal/reform—this can be interpreted to mean that materialist theory is superior only from a partisan standpoint, such that materialist contestations can only be exchanged between self-avowed leftists. And given that our present imperative is the critique of the political deficiencies of post-colonialism, it would seem reasonable, from the standpoint of

mainstream political theory, that the assertion of materialism be regarded as nothing more than a dispute internal to left theory. However, the power of this formulation is that it cuts across all theoretical tendencies—whether they explicitly claim to be ‘left’ or ‘right’ or ‘neutral’. The basic categories of our foundational antithesis (materialism and idealism, revolutionary and liberal/reform politics) hence do not refer to explicit claims, as a phenomenal complexity of theoretical and political tendencies surely exist in any given conjuncture. Yet the *real* politics of theory, as posited in our thesis, are determined *in spite of* what a theory explicitly claims about itself, in spite of its explicitly articulated purpose. Indeed, this discrepancy is the primary symptom of theoretical idealism, which is consistent with our opening contestations against post-colonialism. Materialist contestations can be asserted powerfully against any theory, not just against explicitly leftist contenders.

Regarding the specificity of materialist theory, it is one thing to point out the obvious shortcomings of a theory that so wilfully ignores capitalism, while it is quite another to produce a convincing account of what specifically makes historical materialism a materialist theory, and post-colonialism idealist. At root, what is the real difference between materialist theory and idealist theory? The distinction is apparently related to explanatory primacy of ‘the material’ (taken in historical materialism to be the economic) or that of ‘the ideal’ (taken to include the discursive). If someone does not understand the origin of this problematic, one possibility is that they will assume that the difference between materialist theory and idealist theory is that they simply have different ontological concerns, such that they are studying different aspects of social and political reality. In this causal view, historical materialism seeks to understand the economic, while contemporary theory seeks to understand the cultural, discursive, ideological, etc. In this view, they could be complementary theoretical endeavours, not

at all antagonistic to one another. This is clearly contradictory to our basic thesis. While it is true that materialist theory and idealist theory have different ontological claims, the difference between materialist theory and idealist theory is not equivalent to the difference between physics and chemistry, which study different orders of magnitude of material reality. It is rather true that ontology is a stake in the contestation between materialist theory and idealist theory. In other words, the contestation between materialism and idealism is over the conception of theory itself. So, what of these categories: ‘the material’ and ‘the ideal’? How are these categories foundational to the conception of theory? And how, through historical materialism, did ‘the material’ come to mean the economic? In order to answer these questions, it is crucial that one understand the contestation between materialism and idealism at its point of origin, as Marx in contestation with the Young Hegelians, and the entire tradition of German idealism. However, it is crucial that this contestation not be reduced to Marx contra the Young Hegelians, as this once again risks making it seem like a contestation over left theory. The point is that the very conception of theory is at stake in this contestation, and this is what makes it invaluable to problematize the contemporary social sciences in terms of this contestation.

If one does not understand the answer to these questions, and just parrots the primacy of the economic by rote, it is inevitable that one will eventually fall prey to vulgar materialism—the uncritical use of science or of reductionism—which as Lenin said, is worse than intelligent idealism.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, in Chapter 2, we aim to understand more acutely what the specificity of materialist theory is, in contradistinction to idealist theory, and in relation to our basic claim that the difference between materialism and idealism, on the theoretical plane, corresponds to the political antinomy between

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<sup>23</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works* 38, 276.

revolutionary and liberal/reform. What is necessary, to begin, is to understand the origination of this problematic, materialism contra idealism, as a contestation over the banner of theory.

## **2.2. The Conceptual Basis of Historical Materialism**

The antagonism between Marx and the Young Hegelians must be understood as a contestation over the rightful claim to ‘theory’. Theory here is taken as the articulated totality of systemic thought, which precludes conceptual segregation of science from philosophy. This is important because it immediately signals that the assertion of materialist theory against idealist theory is not the abnegation of philosophy, as is so often claimed, in disparaging the alleged ‘scientism’ of Marxist materialism. Those who disparage the ‘scientism’ of materialism will often go on to disparage rationality and critique altogether. This will become important for us later on, because in post-colonialism the critique of Orientalism often ends up as scepticism of so-called Occidental rationality. In the meantime, it cannot be sugar-coated. To be a partisan of materialism is most definitely to champion rationality, for it is rationality that enables the very conception of theory (i.e. *systemic* thought), and also rationality that enables emancipatory politics, which is inconceivable without it. It may be possible to be a meta-physicist and disavow rationality (e.g. Nietzsche), but it is not possible to be a theorist and disavow rationality. This is just as true theoretical physics as it is in social theory. The avowal of rationality in theory may only be implicit, or, it may be explicitly articulated as a theoretical conception of rationality, i.e. epistemology. When epistemology is not explicitly articulated, as for example in the physical sciences, this may be taken implicitly as the assertion of empiricism (and perhaps even outright hostility to the endeavour of the philosophy of science), or as a division of labour

between science and the philosophy of science. In whatever case, a theoretical physicist might never give any thought to the epistemological basis of her work, and arguably without much consequence to the progress of physics. However, the same refusal to articulate the conceptual basis for theory is much more consequential in social theory, whether this is taken as the assertion of empiricism, or as the division of labour between social theory and social philosophy. The reversion to empiricism in social theory, as exemplified in the work of Foucault (to be discussed in Chapter 3), is always reactionary, owing to the politics of theory, to be developed in this chapter.

The assertion of materialism is most basically the avowal of rationality (as the precondition for both theory and emancipatory politics), and secondly, the critique of empiricism (maintaining a difference between the apparent and the real, and the importance of abstraction). These preliminary points, crucial to the critique of post-colonialism, are mentioned now only because they are not at stake in the contestation between Marx and the Young Hegelians, given that the latter neither disavow rationality nor epistemology, as do Foucault and the post-colonialists. The Young Hegelians, furthermore, understood quite well the critique of empiricism, which was most devastatingly formulated by Hegel. Finally, both Marx and the Young Hegelians take the assertion of the intelligibility of history, as the primary condition of possibility for the very inception of emancipatory politics. This conjunction of rationality and emancipation is articulated as emancipatory theory.

While against Foucault and the post-colonialists, it may be sufficient to simply point out that the disavowal of rationality abnegates the possibility of emancipatory politics, in addition to rendering their claims to ‘theory’ as incoherent, against the Young Hegelians, something more is needed. With the Young Hegelians, use of the word ‘theory’ is not intrinsically incoherent, as it is for the post-colonialists, because

theirs can rightly be called *systemic* thought. The incoherence of the idealism of the Young Hegelians is hence not internal to the framework of the theory itself, but rather between theory and real politics. This is to say that the articulation between theory and politics, which is foundation for the very conception of the rationality of political action, is incoherent. So what is really at stake in the contestation between Marx and the Young Hegelians is the theoretical conception of rationality, as the conceptual basis for the science of history, and consequently for all social and political theory.

The theoretical foundation of the political thought of the Young Hegelians is Hegel's dialectical conception of rationality and of history. Hegel's dialectical conception of rationality was, in some regards, a radicalization of Kantian critique because Hegel realized that rationality is socially and historically mediated. Consequently, in critiquing religion, for example, it is not enough to say only that it is irrational; rather, the imperative is to provide a rational account of why people think what they think. Crucially, the historicity of rationality does not entail that we disavow truth and universality, as this would disable critique. Rather, the movement of history itself is taken as the conception of rationality. A dialectical conception of history, through which cognitive progress is coupled to historical progress, is the basis for a fully *immanent* account of transcendental reflection. Rationality and emancipation are simultaneously articulated, which is achieved through the conception of the singular universal, through which truth is given determinate (as opposed to transcendental) content. Crucially, the historicist conception of rationality must be underwritten by the intelligibility of history. This entails a rational account of the development of history. Because the conception of rationality is underwritten by the presumed intelligibility of history, the universality of truth is confirmed by the universality of emancipation.

While Hegel did not see his conception of rationality and emancipation as



being revolutionary, the Young Hegelians tried to politicize Hegel's dialectical thought, believing that the dialectical critique of existing forms of social thought (religious, legal, philosophical, etc.) could be revolutionary. The consequence of their efforts was what has come to be the primary symptom of idealism: that education can lead to emancipation. This is parodied in *The German Ideology*: "Let us revolt against this rule of concepts. Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thought which correspond to the essence of man; says another, how to take up a critical attitude to them; says the third, how to get them out of their heads; and existing reality will collapse." Marx's materialism is, first and foremost, asserted against the idealist conception of history, wherein the development of history was taken as the development of consciousness, with the consequence that social and political transformation is taken as enlightenment *qua* education. This has been expressed as the claim that 'social consciousness' (*i.e.* the ideal) does not determine 'social being' (*i.e.* the material, but more properly 'the real'); however, too often this has been taken discursively and hence misunderstood. Crucially, this is not to say that knowledge or even ideas don't matter. This insight is theoretical and can only be understood *systemically*. 'Social consciousness' and 'social being' are systemic categories, and cannot be reduced to a simple discursive antagonism. To translate this into terms of social theory, this is the idea that the abstract, or ideal, cannot have an ultimately determinant explanatory role, in determining 'the real'. The simple reason for this is that 'the real' is always radically 'outside' of 'the ideal'. To be sure, Marx's contestation is not that 'social consciousness' is ontologically redundant to 'social being', for materialist theory still maintains a dialectical conception of history. So this is no simple reversal. However, it is clear that the primary explanatory imperative of social theory must be to theorize 'social being', to discover the dynamic of history there.

So what is ‘social being’, which had not even been conceptualized by the Young Hegelians? The answer to this is to be found in the materialist conception of history. A very clear formulation of Marx’s materialist conception of history appeared in the 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, and is worth quoting at length here:

My inquiry led me to the conclusion that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life, the totality of which Hegel, following the example of English and French thinkers of the eighteenth century, embraces within the term ‘civil society’; that the autonomy of this civil society, however, has to be sought in political economy. The study of this, which I began in Paris, I continued in Brussels, where I moved owing to an expulsion order issued by M. Guizot. The general conclusion at which I arrived and which, once reached, became the guiding principle of my studies can be summarized as follows:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or — this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms — with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development, of the productive forces, these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead, sooner or later, to the transformation of the whole, immense, superstructure.

In studying such transformations, it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic, or philosophic — in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by

what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production.

The Young Hegelians have essentially only theorized at the level of ‘social consciousness’, and Marx’s claim was that in theorizing only social consciousness, the Young Hegelians *had not objectivized anything at all*, for they had not even discovered the conceptual basis necessary to do so. The claim that the Young Hegelian’s theoretical idealism has not objectivized anything at all is really the claim that historical materialism is the rightful bearer of the title of ‘theory’, i.e. objectivity. In the physical sciences, the superiority of one theory over another is related to explanatory power, and the assertion of materialism over idealism is definitely related to its superior explanatory power. However, in the big picture of historical explanation, while historical materialism can claim to be a theoretical framework that can basically account for the development of human society since the Iron Age, Hegel could also make a compelling claim to have such a theoretical account of the development of history. A Hegelian here might claim that their account is just as valid, as it also provides an apparently rational account of the development of history. Whose theory is the correct way to conceptualize the development of human history? Is history driven by the development of social consciousness, or by the development of the economic modes of production? It is in this regard that materialist theory can’t be specified merely by its superior explanatory power, in the same way as the physical sciences, because ultimately, in the social sciences, explanation must be actualized at the level of practice.

What Marx realized was that Hegel’s dialectical conception of history (through which the conjunction between rationality and emancipation is forged) is *not* revolutionary, because it was only after the fact that the rationality of history could be

seen in this conception. Hence, it was not empowering, and did not enable action. Hegel's dialectic was inert, incapable of transforming rational understanding of history into practice. In claiming the banner of theory, Marx is not only challenging the conceptual basis of theory, but also the very conception of objectivity *qua* rationality. This can be taken as a claim to scientificity, taken as a claim to *objectivity* as the conceptual basis of (scientific) knowledge. This is what was meant by the famous Eleventh Thesis, that the philosophers have only interpreted the world, while the point is to change it. Idealism provides a 'rational' narrative understanding of the movement of history, but this conception of the rationality of history is not practically empowering, in that it did not enable practical action towards emancipation. There is a difference between rationality *qua* understanding/interpretation, and rationality *qua* praxis.

It is crucial that this is not interpreted as Marx simply advancing a new *purpose* for theory, such that we can epistemically segregate different types of theory by their purpose. This is what is done in the modern social sciences, in the difference between critical theory and mainstream political theory, and also in the difference between political philosophy and political theory. However, as mentioned in the beginning, our conception of theory is of the articulated totality of systemic thought—the most consistent and coherent framework possible. While idealism may be betrayed by a failure of explicit purpose, it is more generally betrayed by a failure of systemic thought, as some internal lapse or lacuna. These failures may either be in the consistency and coherence of theory itself (with respect to its own framework), or a contradiction between theory and reality (either explanatory, or related to the politics of theory). In the particular case of the Young Hegelians, because philosophical idealism is truly systemic thought, idealism in this case cannot be revealed through internal incoherence. (While in the case of post-colonialism, its analytic and normative

frameworks are not even consistent.) In such cases it must always be revealed in the disjuncture between what a discourse says it is, and what it actually does. In both the case of the Young Hegelians and the post-colonialists, they both claim to be emancipatory discourses, and yet in both cases their discourse is essentially an ideological supplement to liberal politics. Not only is historical materialism able to provide a theoretical account of the ideological uses of idealist theory, but furthermore, historical materialism itself is not amenable to the same sorts of ideological appropriations. This alone is enough to maintain the superiority of historical materialism, but to pin down the specificity of materialist theory we have to more rigorously formulate its epistemic basis.

### **2.3. Epistemic Basis of Historical Materialism**

In uncovering the epistemic basis of historical materialism, in contradistinction to the epistemic basis of any other social or political theory, we have to pay careful attention to the conception of subjectivity and objectivity. Already we have seen that the conception of objectivity in historical materialism, as the conceptual basis of theory, is derived from the materialist conception of history, and is related to the economic base of society. What of subjectivity in historical materialism? We recall that it was Hegel's insight that subjectivity has social and historical determinants, to be theorized in the context of a theory of history. Owing to their idealist conception of history, in which the development of history is taken as the development of social consciousness, the Hegelian conception of subjectivity was itself idealist, in that it was related to the liberal conception of the individual, which is a considerable philosophical presupposition. It is a common philosophical presupposition for idealist theory. The reason is that a truly socio-historical conception of subjectivity can only be articulated from within a

materialist conception of history. A fully social conception of subjectivity is as the articulation of social relations, which in historical materialism are related to the mode of production. They are hence labour relations. A fully historical conception of subjectivity is the articulation of political subjectivities (as the antagonism that is the dynamic of social and political transformation). This is essentially the class-based imaged of subjectivity, which has objective determinations in the economic relations of society, and which has something like ‘class consciousness’, which itself must be objectivized within historical materialism. It is also the conception of a political epistemology.

The epistemic basis of historical materialism can also be understood as a dialectical critique of empiricism. What we will see is that all idealist theory can be shown to have metaphysical presuppositions (which is to say an un-theorized, ahistorical, transcendental conceptual basis), which, if not explicitly avowed, are smuggled in through an empiricist epistemology. Basic to the critique of empiricism is a difference between appearance and reality, such that abstractions have a central role in the theory of knowledge. The materialist charge against idealist theory is not that it is wrong, but that it dabbles at the level of phenomenal appearances. This difference between appearance and reality is what is retained in the conception of ideology. Ideology can be conceptualized as a failure to objectivize subjectivity, such that the conceptual basis of thought is itself un-theorized.

In a sense, one can say that idealists have not theorized (*i.e.* objectivized) their own subjectivity, and hence conceptualize ideology as a failure of reflexivity. However, this failure has *real* determinations, such that it cannot be rectified merely by rational critique. On the one hand, we can say that the difference between ideology and science is a conceptual basis, such that there is a real theoretical break between ideology and historical materialism. It is then only within historical materialism that idealism can be

objectivized, whereupon it is given the objective conception of ideology. Ideology is conceptualized as being subjective, in that it has not theorized its own determinations, but it cannot do so in its own conceptual framework. That framework is radically ‘outside’ of an idealist point of view. As Louis Althusser observed, “[Marxism is] a theory which defines itself dialectically, not merely as a science of history (historical materialism) but also and simultaneously as a philosophy, a philosophy that is capable of accounting for the nature of theoretical formations and their history, and therefore capable of accounting for itself, by taking itself as its own object. Marxism is the only philosophy that theoretically faces up to this test.”<sup>24</sup>

#### **2.4. The Politics of Theory**

There are two fundamental, antagonistic tendencies in theory: materialism and idealism.<sup>25</sup> All phenomenal contestations of theory are instantiations of this one fundamental contestation, or else are pseudo-contestations. The antagonism between materialism and idealism is systemic and cannot be simplified to a discursive antagonism, as its instantiation into discourse is always conjunctural. The politics of theory, which articulate the antagonism between materialism and idealism, can only be conceptualized from within materialist theory, and is articulated by a political epistemology. From the standpoint of idealist theory, the assertion that there are only two fundamental tendencies in theory is itself unthinkable. This owes to the fact that the contestation between materialism and idealism is over the very conception of theory, as

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<sup>24</sup> Althusser, Louis, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, London: Verso, 2005, 39.

<sup>25</sup> “Marx and Engels were partisans in philosophy from start to finish, they were able to detect the deviations from materialism and concessions to idealism and fideism in every one of the “recent” trends.” V. I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964, 319.

was already discussed in the particular instance of Marx contra the Young Hegelians. More generally, the strategic frontlines of the theoretical contestation between materialism and idealism are the conceptual divisions and boundaries drawn in systemic thought, most crucially between science and philosophy, and between the natural and the social. The materialist conception of theory is of the articulated totality of systemic thought, internally differentiated but cohesive. Materialist theory always has epistemic superiority to antagonistic idealist theory, because it can objectivize idealism (which idealism itself is unable to do), and moreover, it can objectivize itself. In other words, materialist theory is truly systemic thought, articulating its own theoretical conditions, while idealism is always somehow partially untrue, because it has not theorized its own determinations. More basically, materialism has superior explanatory power. Finally, materialist theory has both an explanatory discourse and a normative discourse that are consistent with one other. Hence, although materialism and idealism are both fundamental tendencies, the difference between them is not partial or relative.

The materialist conception of theory is underwritten by the materialist conception of science, which is of a single unified science, the science of history. It is only through such a science of history that the conjunction of rationality and emancipation is possible. This conception of science yields an ontology of practice, not of objects, and a praxial epistemology, articulating the relationship between theory and practice. It is through this conception of science that materialist theory is able to critique idealism as theory—even when idealism itself disavows the very basis of systemic thought. It should be clear that materialism and idealism are two fundamental, antagonistic tendencies not only in theory, but also in practice. Furthermore, from the standpoint of materialism, all thought is recognized as being systemic, given its cognitive, social, and historical determinants, which are objectivized in the context of



materialist theory. In this sense, all thought may be critiqued as theory, from the standpoint of materialism, and hence included in our thesis, that there are two fundamental, antagonistic tendencies in theory.

This gambit is directly related to Lenin's assertion that there are only two fundamental camps in philosophy, materialism and idealism, with Althusser's elaboration that philosophy has no history (or development) but is only cyclic.<sup>26</sup> By philosophy, Althusser really meant ideology. We have replaced this with theory as the articulated totality of systemic thought, with the consequence that theory does have a history, which is connected to real history. This change of Althusser's formulation is not cosmetic but is really substantive, fundamentally changing the conception of materialism and idealism, so that they are not merely relational. Further still, this changes the conception of politics, both the politics of theory and real politics. It also changes the conception of science, in a way that is necessary in order to actualize our claim that the superiority of materialist theory over idealist theory is related to the superiority of scientific explanation, as opposed to any other kind of explanation. This requires a positive conception of knowledge, rather than reducing contestations over knowledge to class war in theory, as Althusser does. This means that materialist theory requires a robust conception of science. In this, two crucial questions arise. What of philosophy? And, what of the division between the natural sciences and the social sciences?

In the materialist conception of science, all scientific practice necessarily has (sometimes considerable) philosophical presuppositions, which contaminate knowledge and which can deter the development of theory. These philosophical presuppositions

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<sup>26</sup> Althusser bases this on Marx's enigmatic remark from *The German Ideology* that "morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology... have no history, no development."

can be conceptualized as being epistemological. Materialist scientific practice must hence include critical practice, as was originally intended by critical philosophy. The materialist conception of science is of the unity of scientific thought and critical thought. If scientific practice adheres to unjustifiable philosophical presuppositions, then the development of science will be stunted. The most important example of this for our purposes is the epistemic division between 'knowing' and 'judging', which serves as the justification for the division of political theory and political philosophy, and underlies positivistic social science.

The development of science entails that the boundary between science and philosophy be renegotiated, in a process that leads to the development of theory *qua* the totality of systemic thought, which usually entails the conceptual renovation of theory. In this process of renegotiating the conceptual boundary between scientific and speculative thought, science always leads. If philosophy tries to hold ground claimed for science, it becomes ideological. As an example, if the philosophy of mind/consciousness does not take heed of developments in cognitive neuroscience, then they become idealist. The final question *vis-à-vis* the fate of philosophy under materialism is whether there is something called philosophical materialism, and whether our conception of theory as the totality of systemic thought is the unity of scientific thought and speculative thought. Answering this is necessary if our opening gambit is really to hold in establishing a non-relativistic relationship between materialism and idealism. However, the contestations between materialism and idealism with which we are concerned are basically epistemological, so ignoring this issue is not so important.

This should make it clear that the assertion of materialism against idealism is not an attempt to do away with philosophy. It is true that at crucial junctures in the development of theory, when science claims ground once held by philosophy, it can

take on the phenomenal appearance of science contra philosophy. This was indeed the case for Marx's materialist contestations against the Young Hegelians, which is why so many people assume that Marx meant to end philosophy. However, the abnegation of philosophical idealism is the abnegation of ideology alone, not the abnegation of all speculative and critical thought.

Going back to our opening gambit, we remember that we have defined theory as the totality of systemic thought. When we said that the contestation between materialism and idealism generates the development of theory, this means that development is systemic. Therefore, the contestation between materialism and idealism is instantiated into theory at systemic boundaries and divisions. We have already posited that this means theory as the unity of scientific thought and critical thought (and potentially speculative thought). It also means theory as the unity of the natural and the human and social, as this conceptual division is played out across scientific thought and critical thought and speculative thought. The nature of this division is different from the division between philosophy and science, in that it is primarily ontological, while the latter is epistemological. These divisions are instantiated into political contestation oftentimes more overtly than epistemological divisions. This is most notable in the division between the natural and the human, and ultimately between natural history and human history. Most obviously, consider the contestation between creationism and evolution, which is a forthright contestation between theology and science. At times this contestation is patently reactionary, while at others, such as forthcoming contestations over genetic engineering, are less so. As science advances, the contestation between materialism and idealism will always be instantiated into the conceptual division between natural history and human history.

Aside from the division between the natural and the human, it should be noted

that all ontological and epistemological divisions as accrued through the many proliferating academic disciplines are all to be critiqued as part of materialist scientific practice. Within a materialist conception of science, it is presumed that eventually all scientific disciplines will be connected within a single unified theory with a single unified ontology. This conception of science is necessary in order to be a partisan of cognitive progress without espousing historical progress, because a major imperative of materialism is to not judge present in terms of unactualized ideals. In the meantime, scientists within any discipline must learn to think critically about the ontological and epistemological presuppositions of their science, and to think across disciplinary boundaries, and across ontological and epistemological divisions. This is the practice of materialist science. The movement of materialist theory is always towards the unity of these divisions, wherein they are made to answer to each other, in the most coherent and consistent standard framework possible at a given conjuncture.

## **2.5. Historical Materialism *Contra* Post-Colonialism**

Most basic to the epistemic superiority of historical materialism is the conceptual basis of historical materialism that is totally absent in post-colonialism. That conceptual basis is derived from the materialist conception of history, in which there is a crucial analytical distinction made between a ‘material’ base of society (taken to be the economic) and its ‘ideal’ superstructure (taken to include the discursive).

Conceptual discovery of the base is the precondition for materialist theory (because it is only once the proper concepts have been discovered that explanatory, as opposed to merely descriptive, relations can be elaborated). This is the sense in which Marx can be said to have discovered a new science, wherein scientific explanations are taken to be superior to other kinds of explanation, and this underlies a conception of knowledge.

Post-coloniality almost entirely confines itself analytically to the ‘ideal’ superstructure, with no conceptual grasp of the material base of society, with the consequence that as an analytical framework, it is entirely descriptive, and ultimately interpretive. Our claim of the explanatory superiority of historical materialism is substantiated by the fact that the theoretical aspect of post-coloniality is unable to account for its own political uses, while historical materialism is not amenable to serving as an ideological supplement to neoliberalism, and is further able to provide an account of why post-modernity is prevalent in late capitalism.<sup>27</sup>

At the level of theoretical articulation, this is fundamentally because post-coloniality has not theorized its own determinations, while historical materialism does provide a theoretical account of the determinations of theory. Explicitly, this is because post-coloniality disavows epistemology as fundamentally oppressive, such that the need to articulate its own epistemological basis is pre-empted as a normative imperative. However, the fact that post-coloniality partakes of theory nonetheless means that what we have is disavowed reflection, and implicit empiricism, in which the conceptual basis of theory is left untheorized. This is not a minor failure that can be remedied from within post-colonial theory itself. The contention of historical materialism is that no adequate account of the determinations of post-colonial theory can be produced from within the conceptual apparatus of post-colonial theory itself. Such an account can only be found once the conceptual basis of materialist theory is discovered which establishes the primacy of labour and of the economic base of society (historical materialism).

Analytically key to problematizing social relations in the materialist conception

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<sup>27</sup> See Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991, and Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990.

of history is the division of labor, which becomes increasingly more branched with the development of history. The most basic division is that between mental and manual labor, and this is crucial for Marx's conception of ideology *qua* philosophical idealism. This move is also necessary in order to assess post-colonialism as theory. In this conception, theoretical idealism, in which ideas appear to have power over the movement of history, is fundamentally related to the division between mind and hand. Marx's critique of ideology *qua* philosophical idealism *qua* the division of labour has been mishandled in any number of ways. Marx is not saying that ideas have no role in history (as we have it in the accusations against Marxism made by the disconsolate practitioners of the sociology of knowledge)<sup>28</sup> or that intellectuals have no role or are simply 'bourgeois'. In fact, this critique is not immediately political, because it is primarily explanatory. Philosophical idealism is the consequence of the division of labor, and is hence fundamental to class-based society. This may later be politicized in terms of a conception of class-consciousness, through which epistemology is fundamentally political, but this leap cannot be haphazardly made. The association of ideology critique with the sort of rhetoric which claims "it is just bourgeois theory" is rather tired, and we are not attempting to abnegate idealism by claiming it is just wrong, we are circumscribing it within materialist theory.

Crucial to the political superiority of historical materialism is that it has not only an explanatory discourse but also a normative discourse, and that these are consistent with one another in a single, coherent theoretical framework. It is this consistency between the analytical and the normative that renders historical materialist political thought superior. The inconsistency between the analytical and normative in

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<sup>28</sup> See Fischer, Ariane, "Settling Accounts with the Sociology of Knowledge: The Frankfurt School, Mannheim, and the Marxian Critique of Ideology *qua* Mental Labor." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108 (Spring 2009): 2.

post-coloniality is related to its disavowal of universality—and yet without universality, a conception of emancipation is impossible. As already mentioned, the first consequence of a disavowal of universality is that it does not provide an account of its own epistemological basis (having rejected epistemology) while in effect, being an analytical discourse, it is empiricist. Historical materialist epistemology is deemed superior to post-colonialist empiricism because of its superior explanatory power, most crucially in explaining the determinations of post-colonial ideology itself. Because this empiricist analytical discourse is the basis of post-colonialist political thought, empiricism is also a political failure. Because their analysis is beset by empiricism, the power relations that they analyze are always local and contingent, with the consequence that post-colonial political thought can never be anything more than tactical. In contradistinction, the historical materialist conception of class relations (which is a *systemic* antagonism) claims that *universal* emancipatory politics requires strategic thinking. Without strategic thinking, historical materialism claims that power relations will simply be shifted from one local context to another. Related to this is that post-coloniality cannot articulate the basis of its own normative claims, while post-colonialists do nonetheless make normative statements about the post-colonial power relations they have analyzed. However, they can provide no theoretical account of why these power relations are bad, nor can they articulate a positive account of social relations not beset by the species of power with which they are presently concerned.

## **2.6. Tractatus on Materialism**

i. The critique of empiricism is a formative moment in the progress towards materialism. This maintains a crucial distinction between the apparent and the real, and the active role of cognition in abstracting out the real from the apparent. The process of

abstraction is not passive or reflective, nor is it transcendental. Rather, it has real determinants, including cognitive, social, and historical. This does not, however, render our conception of knowledge socially and historically relative. Rather, it entails that the materialist conception of science is of a single unified science, the science of history.

ii. The political valence of materialism is underscored by the following question: how does knowledge of the social and historical determinants of *subjectivity* problematize our thinking on politics?

iii. The political valence of materialism reveals phenomenal subjectivity<sup>29</sup> to be a mystification of the *social* and *historical* origin and dynamic of subjectivity. Awareness of this mystification undermines the liberal conceptions of both the individual and of the nature of values.

iv. Materialism is fundamentally a critique of phenomenal subjectivity but crucially, subjectivity is never taken as ‘wrong’ in materialism. It is rather the purpose of materialism to discover the systemic determinations of the phenomenal—in other words, to objectivize it, abstracting out ‘the real’. This process of ‘demystification’ is, on the one hand, simply part of producing knowledge, of abstraction and theoretical work, innate to any science. At the political valence of materialism, however, subjectivity is given the special designation of being ideological, and the purpose of ideology critique (taken as the objectivization of the subjective) is to change the coordinates in which politics is problematized. It enables us, in other words, to ask the right questions that will reveal the *real politics* of the situation—what is at stake.

v. Subjectivity can only be objectivized in the context of social theory. This requires, firstly, a conception of society as the *totality* of social relations. Conception of

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<sup>29</sup> *i.e.* the way you experience yourself as an apparently autonomous subject—in both phenomenological and empirical terms (which encompasses both phenomenology and empiricism).



the *totality* is indispensable, as it is the only way one can transcend subjectivity *qua* appearance (the phenomenal self) to a conception of objectivity *qua* ‘social being’ (the real).

vi. Note that our conception of society is of the totality of social *relations*, not of the sum total of individual subjectivities. The reason for this is that it is social relations that are taken to be the *dynamic* of *social transformation*, which is the basis for a theoretical conception of history, as the *articulated totality of social relations*. It is from within this theoretical apparatus that one will be able to think *theoretically* on both society, and on one’s own subjectivity, as a means to progressively objectivize them.

vii. The dynamic of social transformation is ontological, which is to say that the development of history is dialectical. The dialectic is between ‘social being’ and ‘social consciousness’. Fundamental to the materialist conception of history is that ‘social being’ determines ‘social consciousness’ and not *vice versa*, which is not to say that social consciousness has no efficacy whatsoever, or is an epi-phenomenon. Social consciousness is not ontologically redundant.

viii. The conception of the social totality (*i.e.* social being), which underscores the formulation of social theory, imbues our thinking with a normative dimension (*i.e.* social consciousness). Materialism absolutely demands this dimension of *universality*. Recognition of the socio-historical *contingency* of subjectivity must not give way to relativism in the normative dimension, and the disavowal of universality. To do so is to default to idealism.

ix. Materialism’s normative dimension is highly attenuated. Within the conception of historical materialism, materialists have the licence to declare that capitalism is unjust in its social relations based on a positive conception of species-being. However this does not allow them to put forward any teleological or utopian

speculation about a post-capitalist or classless society. Any type of utopian imaginary cannot be enabled by dialectics. A materialist may insinuate a movement towards better social configurations (*i.e.* they can identify progressive movement in history) however, constructing outright a futurological vision based on a projection into the future of the values of the present day is highly questionable.

x. We begin with the phenomenal complexity of social antagonisms, which we may problematize in any number of ways: culture, politics, discourse, *etc.* Such conceptualizations may also have a normative dimension: power, domination, exploitation, oppression, *etc.* None of these pre-given conceptions can be taken as the *theoretical* conception of social antagonism, or as the theoretical conception of universality, which are the prerogative of *materialist* social theory, not empiricism. This theoretical conception will be distinguished from all the rest by virtue of its *explanatory* capacity, as opposed to being merely descriptive or interpretative. It is to the *explanatory* capacity of theory that the designation of ‘objectivity’ rests.

xi. Ultimately, an *explanatory* framework of social and political transformation is distinguished from a *descriptive* or *interpretative* framework through *revolutionary political practice*, or ‘the real movement that abolishes the present state of things.’ Why revolutionary? Revolutionary political practice is taken to lead to *universal* social and political transformation, and it is the universality of emancipation that confirms the epistemic *universality* of our theory.

xii. This can be articulated into a conception of progress, whereby progress of knowledge (of social consciousness towards truth) is coupled to the progress of history (of social being towards emancipation). Key again here is the social being determines social consciousness, and not vice versa.

xiii. This is developed into a conception of political epistemology, articulating

the relationship between materialist theory and revolutionary practice via political subjectivity. The fundamental insight of a political epistemology is that an objective standpoint is necessarily a partisan standpoint. What is ‘true’ at a given conjuncture will not be universally regarded as such, because ideology prevents this objective truth from being generally recognized. It will only be regarded as such from a *partisan* standpoint, which is the vantage point. In a society of domination and exploitation, truth (the universal) can only be seen from a partisan standpoint.

xiv. What is required theoretically is an account of transcendental reflection. Crucially, if the very conception of materialist social theory is to hold, there must exist a *singular (or concrete) universal*, which is to say that materialist theory must articulate the condition of its own possibility. A transcendental viewpoint is hence taken to be socially and historically *immanent*.

xv. The concrete universal is the concrete incarnation of the most advanced point of species being so far. That concrete universal is both epistemically privileged in its capacity to objectivize society and its own antagonistic position within it, as well as normatively privileged in that its values are not ideological, as well as poised to be the body of the revolution, to enact political transformation that is truly universal and emancipatory.

xvi. In the Orthodox Marxist political reading of Marx’s theory, historical materialism, this concrete universal is taken to be the proletariat. For our purposes, we use the theoretical conception of ‘class’ to signify the systemic social antagonism that is the dynamic of the real movement of history.

xvii. The conceptual basis of materialist social theory abstracts (out of the phenomenal complexity of social antagonisms) the real dynamic of the movement of history. The basic insight of the materialist conception of history is of the primacy of

social labour in conceptualizing social relations.

xviii. In a society of domination and exploitation (*i.e.* capitalism), the overwhelming tendency of subjectivity is towards ideology. In ideological political practice, there is a disjunction between subjectivity and objectivity. On the one hand, this means that one's *knowledge* of society is not adequate, such that one cannot intend the outcome of one's actions. On the other hand, one's normative judgments are not truly *universal* but are rather contingent, perhaps only in the interest of a limited part of society.

xix. In revolutionary political practice, subjectivity and objectivity are conjunct. On the one hand, we can say that one has objective *knowledge* of society, which enables one's action to be effective. On the other hand, one's normative judgments are truly *universal* such that one's action is not only in one's own interest, but in the *universal* interest of society.

xx. Materialism and idealism are two fundamental, antagonistic tendencies in theory and in practice. Materialism and idealism are unlike any other antagonistic cognitive binary. They are fundamental and antagonistic with respect to the *development of history*. Because the development of history is dialectical, we can also say that they are fundamental and antagonistic with respect to the *intelligibility* of history.

xxi. Although they are both fundamental with respect to history, they are not equal from the standpoint of either truth or of emancipation. Theoretically speaking, materialism is superior because it objectivizes itself (*i.e.* it articulates its own conditions of production) as well as objectivizes idealism.

xxii. Materialism fundamentally asserts the *intelligibility of history*. Furthermore, the intelligibility of history, in the materialist conception of rationality, is a

fundamentally *partisan* assertion.

## **2.7. Partisan Theory *Contra* Standpoint Theory: Universality and Contingency**

At the heart of partisan theory is an account of transcendental reflection, which is problematized via the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, between subject and object. In Marxism, we conceive of subjectivity in terms of social relations. It is fundamentally social. In a more broadly materialist sense, it also has other real determinations: neurological, biological, geographical, *etc.* But we are speaking of social theory, and therefore of the aspects of subjectivity which are related to social being. In any standpoint theory, the basic imperative is that subjectivity has theoretical determinations. This is to say that there is an objective social theory, which must obviously be articulated from within the social totality itself, but this social theory articulates social subjectivity, and in doing so it must also articulate the conditions of its own production.

This conception of partisan theory is in contradistinction to both subjectivism and objectivism. In subjectivism, we end up with relativism or nihilism, in which we have no ability to critique other subjectivities as right or wrong, true or false. Such judgments cannot be made in a framework which is beyond good and evil. We may be able to historicize subjectivities, as does Foucault but to historicize is not say that they are right or wrong, true or false. Subjectivism may be related to a metaphysical conception, such as Nietzsche's metaphysics of power but in objectivism, we end up with some sort of absolutist dogmatism, in which we critique other subjectivities as being false or wrong without any theoretical account of transcendental reflection that articulates the determinations of objective discourse. This is essentially theology.

Partisan theory is hence distinguished from both dogmatism and relativism.

Within partisan theory, we can critique other subjectivities, from the standpoint of truth and emancipation. The fundamental imperative of partisan theory is that truth is only accessible from a partisan standpoint. This is possible only with the conception of the universal. This is to say that there is a locus within the social totality that is capable of seeing the entire social totality, from that point.

In post-modernism generally, there is no objective theory, and partisan theory collapses to mere standpoint theory. The objective and the subjective have collapsed. In its most radical variant the theorist must situate herself within her own subjective singularity, her unique perspective, in all of its genealogical detail and in relation to a multiverse of other subjectivities. The question remains: how does such a radical perspectivism uphold any pretense as *social* theory—and more so, as a social theory which claims to generate an emancipatory praxis? Any social theory which makes judgments (such as identification of oppression or domination) requires some concept of social emancipation or a vision of political change at the collective or systemic level and this has to be rooted in an account of transcendental reflection. Such an account must explain how a theory can be attached to a certain subjectivity and yet still be objective. Foucault argues that subjectivity *precludes* objectivity and that we are trapped in a relativistic perspectivism where truth claims are impossible. What then, allows for political judgment?

For our purposes, in developing historical materialism, we must acknowledge that transcendental reflection is equally crucial for social theory as it is for the philosophy of science. The very elaboration of “partisan theory” can be traced to the German tradition of critical theory beginning with Kant and continuing through Hegel and Marx. Epistemology itself (as in the philosophy of science) is a kind of standpoint theory—however we are presently talking about *social* standpoint theory which really

begins with Hegel. This is important for us to note because it highlights a break between two distinct lineages of critical theory. One can be regarded as the tradition that bridges Kant and Marx. In trying to revive a conception of partisanship we are associating ourselves with that lineage. While this tradition embodied a critique of the Enlightenment (both Enlightenment values and rationality) there was never any disavowal of the Enlightenment values of truth and emancipation (these concepts were renovated, rather than abandoned). The other lineage begins with Nietzsche, where truth and emancipation are dismantled. It is precisely this lineage which provides present-day leftist intellectuals with their anti-scientific, literary, perspectival and historicist dispositions. This is not to say that an intelligent Nietzschean philosophy cannot be integrated with a Marxian framework (Deleuze, perhaps). Here the fact remains that in the Foucauldian framework there is an equivocation about emancipation. We are arguing that the notion of emancipation is incoherent in post-coloniality precisely because it is incoherent in Foucault. In the Nietzschean lineage, the only thing to be emancipated is the will to power. The will to power is the prerogative of domination—the right of the strong over the weak. Such a radically conservative doctrine cannot serve to justify the emancipatory pretensions of the post-colonial idealists. Because their theoretical frame rejects transcendental reflection, their supposed praxis is rendered incoherent—emancipation is smuggled in as it were, illicitly.

When we move to the level of political idealism and political materialism, we were approaching the question of the politicization of theory. On the one hand this is the movement from theory to political practice. On the other hand it is the movement from an analytical discourse to a normative discourse. So it is the link between theory and praxis, and the link between facts and values. This is most crucially related to analytical distinction between dominated and dominator, or between oppressor and oppressed. It is

the analytical bedrock upon which a normative approach to oppression can be established and justified.

The first key question is whether the analytical distinction is systemic. If it is, then this means we have at least a negative image of the social totality, or the totality of social relations. This is crucial for any theory which claims to be a social theory. In historical materialism, this image of the totality is capitalism. In Foucault, it is the episteme. In any kind of systemic analysis of power relations, there are two possibilities: it is either idealist or it is materialist. This is crucially related to a distinction between base and superstructure, and the explanatory primacy of the base. If it is purely idealist, then this means that the analytical distinction is made purely at the level of the ideological superstructure, without any recognition of the base. If it is materialist, then the analytical distinction is made through a conception of the base, or social infrastructure. Foucault's 'episteme' is an idealist analytic distinction drawn purely at the level of the superstructure of society.

When this analytical distinction is then coded as 'domination' and expanded into a normative discourse (*i.e.* a discourse on the domination of the Western episteme) one must ask: what exactly is being dominated? What is being oppressed? How does Foucault apprehend the object of oppression? As Habermas has shown in his critique of Foucault,<sup>30</sup> a Foucauldian has disavowed transcendental reflection and therefore, technically, everything they say is subjective. Further, why is it 'good' or 'better' in a Foucauldian theoretical framework that domination or repression should be challenged or resisted? It is crucial here to pay attention to whether one approaches this question via an individualistic-atomistic perspective or from a societal perspective (note that

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<sup>30</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Boston: The MIT Press, 1990.



these two can go together in liberalism). For a Marxist, domination (such as the exploitation of labor by capital) is opposed from the perspective of the totality, and opposing it is justified in terms of the good (the value) of social progress. For Foucault, it is more complicated—owing to the Nietzschean lineage outlined above. Foucault cannot have a conception of something being “bad for society” or “good for social progress” since these notions are regarded as cultural fictions. Of course, these cultural fictions are not mere illusions but bound up in a metaphysical conception of power. Foucault seems to intimate that oppression is bad from some ultimate metaphysical perspective, wherein society is a fiction which suppresses the power of the dominated. Yet Nietzsche’s philosophy in actuality cannot be turned into such a normative social discourse. It is acceptable in some intellectual sense as an analytical framework if one takes will to power as given, but to turn it into a normative discourse on emancipation is surreptitious, and actually internally contradicted by its own framework. This basic philosophical incoherence between the analytical and the normative can be cited as the primary reason why any attempt to render Foucault’s analytical framework into emancipatory politics invariably fails. Under close meta-theoretical scrutiny, we can show that any attempt to do so will degenerate into a kind weak liberalism: either a sort of existential humanism of narrative self-expression or a highly identitarian libertarianism—something Foucault himself ends up espousing politically in his later works.

It is crucial to pay attention to the dialectic between a conception of the individual (is it the liberal conception of the subject? or a conception of the human animal? or what...?) and a conception of the social. There may be a normative sense of why oppression is bad for the individual, but if it is to be social theory (meaning that there is to be a conception of the social) then there must also be a sense of why it is also

bad for the social whole. This is to say that there is an alignment between individual values and social values. Such a contention is crucial to the conception of emancipation, perhaps both as the emancipation of the individual in some conception, but crucially of an emancipated *society*. In Marxism, this means a conception of socialism or communism. In explicitly disavowing the conception of a totality at the discursive level, Foucault is essentially rejecting the idea of society altogether. He is incapable of articulating a vision of an emancipated society.

Other than the link between the analytical and the normative, or facts and values, we also have the link between theory and politics. Key in the politicization of theory is a conception of subjectivity. Who are the oppressed? Who are the oppressors? Who are the friends and enemies of the oppressed? Who are the friends and enemies of emancipation? These questions contribute definition to the problematic of political partisanship. Does one have to be oppressed in order to be on the side of emancipation? What is a leftist? This is important because our analytical framework provides key determinations of oppression, but if we are to politicize theory, this is not only identifying the oppressed. When you don't have a concept of a society in total what is left? How can you have any social outlook?

In post-coloniality (as in gender theory, post-modernism in general) this becomes a straightforward dissolution of objectivity. As a result, post-colonial studies can only map subjectivities—which is essentially a descriptive rhetoric, a catalogue of particularities that describes and historicizes modes of subjectivization. In doing so, post-colonial scholars supposedly challenge or subvert whatever the dominant epistemic regime is supposed to be. Yet it is impossible to theoretically transcend a dependence upon the relationship to what it is that they're supposedly subverting. In historical materialism there is a conjunction between a specific subjective point of view and an

objective point of view—which is accomplished via a conception of class. Through this conception of class, subjectivity can be objectivized within theory itself. Political subjectivization has theoretical determinations. In materialist theory, the theoretical determinations of subjectivity furthermore mean that subjectivity has real material moorings. These material moorings are in fact the conceptual basis of theory and what makes it scientific and explanatory, as opposed to being only phenomenal and descriptive. For Marx, subjectivity is always social, and can be articulated in social theory. For Lenin, the universal is only accessible from this interested standpoint which is partisanship.<sup>31</sup>

Here, the focus is on ‘class’. Let us state clearly that we are not asserting a pre-determined or dogmatic definition of class as “the working class” or class as defined in terms of any specific historical conjuncture. Class is a conceptual category in historical materialism that demarcates real political antagonism at the systemic level—it is a real abstraction that emerged historically as a systemic theory of capitalism, meaning that class is a systemic antagonism. The concept of class pre-supposes a political epistemology insofar as truth is only accessible from a partisan standpoint. The other component is that a partisan standpoint is theoretically determined by historical materialism and it has real moorings. So, class mediates between materialist philosophy and materialist theory. It makes materialist philosophy into a political epistemology and it connects to real materialist practice exactly as Marx conceived it. This is a crucial epistemic point: our discussion of historical materialism has not asserted class in any

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<sup>31</sup> This is a uniquely Marxist insight, and is opposed to the liberal claim that either there is no single universal truth or that universality is an ideal that has eluded governments who cannot pragmatically achieve maximized utility or harmonization of competing views or other forms of ideal consensus in pluralistic societies. Post-modernism goes further to dissociate the universal from the objective, claiming that the universal can only be subjectively articulated.

kind of empiricist or positivistic sense. Rather, it is a key conceptual category.

When we are engaging with the question of partisanship and taking sides in a political conflict, part of the problem in Marxism is figuring out what the sides are because, after all, they are not phenomenally apparent. Post-colonialists accept a phenomenal antagonism between the West and its 'other', for instance, and obviously there is some reality to it, but part of the whole problem is figuring out the real abstraction that will reveal the right sides, before one can even consider taking a side. Again, we need not think of class in the 'classical' Marxists sense of 'the working class'. As a theoretical concept, class will always denote the right abstraction that reveals the real politics of historical conflict. The conditions and methodologies of the application of class as a conceptual category are specific and there are no obvious empirical markers of class which we will necessarily pre-determine.

The point of good materialist scholarship should be to ask the right questions, or to reveal that the questions being asked are pseudo-problems. In accepting phenomenal appearance, post-colonial studies ends up defending what it is to be an Arab or a Muslim, in narrating the Western 'other' as a discursive challenge to imperial power. This has no sufficient connection to an understanding of the real politics of the situation. It is merely a discursive contestation, at a superficial phenomenal level, largely because of this reliance on identity. The pre-eminence of identity comes replete with an almost limitless array of contingent empirical factors which become key determinants in conditioning speech and shaping worldviews (think of the body or the mind as the site of conflict in post-modern anthropology). At the same time, there is a theoretical rejection of systemic conditions which transcend any kind of particular, regional, local structures, and any understanding of the systemic is ruled out as an endangering totality. This lack of understanding of real political antagonisms (which

can't exist in the subjective multiverse) is an inversion of Marxism: the valorization of multiplicity, heterogeneity, instability, hybridity, discontinuity, *etc.* although it is more than an inversion because it displaces this opposition rather than resolving it. This was supposed to be Foucault's paradigmatic theoretical move, but in crass post-modernity, and in post-colonial ideology, we encounter only the re-coding of what was considered to be bad as good. Post-coloniality simply inverts Marxism so that 'universality', 'class' or 'truth' are bad imperialist terms (discourses of power) that are subverted by emphasizing multiplicity, locality, specificity, *etc.* For a materialist, the point is not about affirming one at the extent of the other, but to achieve some sort of dialectical interpenetration of this contradiction.

For Lenin, although class is singular (not everyone is in that class), the proletariat can enact universal transformation and are indeed acting in the interests of all—they have a universal political prerogative. The classical version of partisanship is in Lenin's formulation wherein class emerges through the science of historical materialism. This allows us to recognize 'class' as a political subjectivization. The idea of class (the idea of two antagonistic embodied groups and their antagonism driving historical development) is instantiated in Lenin's account of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Another attribute of class in the Leninist model is that class is epistemological. The idea is that only the proletariat has the prerogative of truth—of seeing reality and having real values. Only proletariat values are universal.

In theory, all of the phenomenal contestations over power in the world can be radically simplified to the contestation inherent in this class antagonism. Notice that this is radically anti-Foucauldian. For Foucault there is no way to simplify power contestations. In order to understand power you only have to know the answer to 'who, what, where when and why?' which is to historicize. You have to know the specifics,

the contingencies, you have to know each power struggle as a singularity. It cannot be reduced or abstracted. Because we are dealing with a system, capitalism, we know what oppression means and therefore emancipation is concrete. A Foucauldian will not know *what* oppressed people are being emancipated *from*. Materialists have a definition of emancipation at a systemic level—Foucauldian post-colonial ideology has no conception of oppression which is systemic. Post-colonial ideology only has a declarative but ultimately unjustified sentimental filiation towards the oppressed. Cataloguing the identity struggles of filiated groups (Muslims, homosexuals, prisoners, *etc.*) may indeed have something to do with their advancement but there is no sense of any systemic connection between those struggles for identity and broader political transformation. Perhaps the contention of post-modern politics is that somehow multiple fragments and rhizomes of organic resistance will spontaneously coalesce into a movement toward a better world. This is the view that American citizens occupying Wall Street represent an authentic uprising that will somehow transform power relations for the better without direction and beyond any theoretical explanation. In the absence of formulated goals, in a vacuum of ideology, agendas, parties, post-modernism finds its natural ally. Post-modern theory remains mysteriously aligned to spontaneous political events that have a progressive aura (such as the Arab Spring) and yet can provide no theoretical justification for this alignment, nor any explanation of what is objectively occurring in the unfolding of real political conflict. If Foucauldian post-coloniality is not telling us anything about the reality of the world and it cannot adjudicate between truth or falsity... what *is* it doing?

## CHAPTER 3

### CONTRA HISTORICISM

“Lenin’s wager—today, in our era of postmodern relativism, more actual than ever—is that truth and partisanship, the gesture of taking sides, are not only not mutually exclusive but condition each other: the universal truth in a concrete situation can only be articulated from a thoroughly partisan position. Truth is by definition one-sided. This, of course, goes against the predominant ideology of compromise, of finding a middle path among the multitude of conflicting interests.”

Slavoj Žižek (2007).

#### **3.1. Partisanship and Theory: Materialist Contestations against Post-Coloniality**

Chapter 1 presented a very demonstrative and critical presentation of the politics of idealism—arguing that post-colonial studies appears radical but is in fact liberal, that it claims to be authentic in its description of political meaning (the local, the fractured, the singular) but in fact by virtue of this manifold organicism it has depleted itself of any social-scientific propensity for systemic explanation of world politics. This critical move ostensibly parallels Marx in *The German Ideology*. Chapter 2 developed this contestation in a more rigorous manner, introducing historical materialism as a theory with superior explanatory power. It addressed the contestation between materialism and idealism and moved us much deeper into the territory charted by the Marxists philosophers—most importantly Lenin and Althusser. Chapter 3 translates this contestation into the terms of modern theory (subjectivity in general—and what Foucault called the ‘modern episteme’). Here, our challenge is to comprehend idealism and materialism within existing theoretical tendencies in the social sciences—or, to map this antagonistic contestation onto the coordinate space of modern theory.

For Althusser (and for Lenin) philosophical contestation was class warfare, and

the history of philosophy was most importantly (if not fatally) a *political* struggle. In this view, the contest between materialism and idealism was not merely a relational one, but an antagonism with ontological status. Here, Marx's critique of idealism and his science of materialism seemed to portend the end of philosophy itself. We will not take this view, assuming instead that philosophy persists just as physics will never (apparently) cease to ask questions about the nature of reality. In the determinant view of idealism/materialism ontology is at stake—in the relational view, there is no ontological question. In the relational view, we can claim that post-colonial theory is worse than materialism because of its inability to describe certain historical phenomena, *and* we can simultaneously claim that politically it is not what it claims to be. Here, we are simply asserting that historical materialism has superior explanatory power and better politics. The relational view is all that is required for the present study. So, let us claim that,

- historical materialism is superior as a framework for scientific investigation of politics, and that
- historical materialism is superior from a political standpoint as a framework for revolutionary times.

The relational view can be demonstrated through dialectical critique showing that there is an apparent contradiction between idealist theory and reality which idealist theory is unable to account for within its own framework.

Both the mainstream social scientists and post-modern academics are idealists—except in very different ways. Idealism has no single unified and self-evident discourse. Generally, post-modernity claims a normative stance against power, let us say, to be dissident, radical, anti-mainstream. However, at the same time it claims to have a theoretical infrastructure that is somehow more serious and privileged than mere



independent activism (bloggers, anarchists, demonstrators, for instance). The other popular tendency in intellectual and institutionalized idealism lies in the supposed objectivity/value-neutrality/methodological rigor of social science instantiated in the course of its own scientific discourse (via academic journals, papers, conferences, *etc.*). Obviously enough, social science eschews the normative (not to mention the ‘radical’) as a matter of professional credibility. For Marx, this is analogous to the difference between critiquing the Young Hegelians and critiquing Adam Smith and the political economists. Positivist-realist forms of idealism always try to *suppress* their political discourse, while post-modernist/anti-realist forms of idealism always try to *express* their political discourse. The latter reject ontological certainty through very explicit interventionist radicalism. The former, characterized by ontological certainty, seem to lend credence to a politics where the world remains forever as it is, determined within space-time and rigid causality. Both strains of idealism must be handled carefully within a materialist critique, weighing carefully the truth and partisanship of mental labour. To achieve this in a single interrogation, we will now consider Foucault’s historicism—perhaps the most advanced strain of idealism in the modern academy—what Sartre called “the last bastion of the bourgeoisie”.

### **3.2. Strategy, Tactics... Taking Sides in Theory**

What exactly warrants the designation of a theory as ‘emancipatory’ (and its more ambiguous correlate, ‘left’)? Can a theory take sides in a political conflict? First we must ask, what is politics (and partisanship) *in* theory, and what is the politics (and partisanship) *of* theory? This chapter will begin with an examination of the articulation between partisanship and theory before engaging with the partisan pretensions of the ‘third wordlist’ tendency of contemporary ‘left’ theory known as ‘post-colonialism’.

While the question of partisanship and theory is a subset of the more general question of politics and theory (or practice and theory), the concept of partisanship is introduced from the beginning as it will reveal itself to be that which distinguishes emancipatory politics/theory from liberalism (hegemonic idealism) and the overt reactionary modes (conservatism and fascism). The latter two are not enemies and may in fact work seamlessly together within the same socio-political apparatus. We should note that for most academics, ‘politics’ is only what a Marxist would call the overt and apparent realm of ideological superstructure. We mean politics in ‘reality’—*i.e.* a total historical conception of social antagonism including those structures which are subsumed/hidden but no less real.

If a theory is to be truly ‘partisan’ *it can’t be used equally by both sides*. To the extent that sides in conflict are theorizable, theory can provide a means to recognize friends and enemies in a conflict, perhaps enabling the constitution of a political party. If political theory enables only partial knowledge of the conflict, then there is a disjunction between theory and politics, and hence politics can only be tactical. For theory to be emancipatory, it must enable truly strategic thinking, and so there cannot be a non-objectivizable remainder between political theory and emancipatory politics. Strategy in emancipatory theory will naturally find its fullest potential and broadest scope in *world* politics. Here Marxism is broadly meta-strategic (global progress) whereas Foucauldian academic production is severely tactical (fracturing, fragmenting).

If, moreover, a theory is to be partisan then it must somehow intrinsically privilege one side over the other; somehow there must not be theoretical parity between the two sides. What could that mean? Perhaps it simply means that it is theorizing from the point of view of one side, which produces one politics; whereas theorizing from the point of view of the opposing side produces another politics. But what would that mean

in the actual contestation? Is one side privileged over the other in the actual contestation? That answer depends upon whether one theoretical point of view is privileged over the other. A strategic privilege of one side over the other would require that side to be able to objectivize the point of view of the other side, while it was limited within its own point of view. A tactical privilege, on the other hand, would require only some relatively more advantageous point of view.

Perhaps theorization of the conflict itself reveals a real and intrinsic tendency towards one side such that knowledge of the conflict is more useful to one side over the other. Or perhaps knowledge of the conflict is only accessible to one side or the other. In whatever case, there is no parity between theorization of politics for the two sides. Surely each side has a distinctive 'politics'. Emancipatory theory must somehow specifically correlate to one side in a conflict; while the other side has a different sort of political theory, and a different sort of politics. Emancipatory theory could not simultaneously be liberal theory (assuming that these two political tendencies are in actuality antagonistic, which is determined by theory itself). The former disables the latter by including it within its own theoretical boundaries. Politics in theory and the politics of theory must be mediated by something (just as partisanship in theory and the partisanship of theory must be mediated by something) and that mediator is the condition of consistency between the two.<sup>32</sup> Taken together, it would seem apparent that politics in theory and the politics of theory must be mutually consistent, meaning that there must be some form of mediation between the two in order to constitute a system of equations. This system of equations must have only a singular answer, such that if a theory carries the designation 'left', then it cannot also carry another designation.

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<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the mediator is the theorist, herself an actor in the political conflict... the answer to that is to be revealed in due time.

Foucault conceptualizes theory as political but this is only because there is no objectivity—Foucault has collapsed objectivity and subjectivity and this is why his theoretical interventions are political (*i.e.* they express the politics of the theorist or the attempt of the theorist to contrive a theoretical framework from the perspective of the poor—the suffering native in post-colonialism). Perhaps they are simply subjective. Postmodernists create theory that is overtly political, subjective, that have normative content, but they do this by collapsing subjectivity and objectivity. This is somehow extra-scientific. Conversely, in positivism, theory is construed as essentially an objective matter—however provisional and however damaged by subjective bias or lack of knowledge. It remains nominally scientific as subjectivity/normativity (‘bias’ or ‘judgment’) is kept separate. But here another line is drawn in the sand with Marxism—which makes no attempt to suppress the normative. In fact, the normative (the paraxial) arises inevitably out of materialism itself—or at least this is the claim.

Incidentally, this is the problem of Nietzschean-inflected academic work which tries to be moral but has no grounding for its moral pronouncements. The morality of its practitioners arises out of nowhere (doing away with absolute good and evil while retaining better and worse). When Foucault is theorizing from the point of view of the mentally ill, the dispossessed, *etc.*, he is trying to be on their side, but this is empty sentimentalism because it has no basis except perhaps in the whims and passing emotions of the practitioner. The ominousness in Nietzschean and Foucauldian frameworks is that they can be wielded by reactionary academics as well as revolutionary ones—whereas Marxism cannot. This is the crux of the matter. Part of the reason why Marxism is intrinsically with the oppressed (partisan) is because the truth always benefits the underclass and never the ruling class. This is very different than the apparent radicalism of ‘dissident’ post-modern academics whose dissidence is

inherently performative rather than scientific—in that its ‘findings’ are so unique, willful, subjective, that no consistency can be found amongst its adherents and acolytes, there is no reproducibility, it is a program that has no body of knowledge except a smorgasbord of literary ‘techniques’ and philosophical games.

### **3.3. Encountering Orientalism**

Generically, today’s left theory focuses on discursively undermining the center of power (the propaganda, media and epistemic bias of empire), while post-colonialism focuses on the peripheries (spaces of exception, nomads, marginal and identity-based forms of resistance). Post-colonialism not only dominates ‘third worldist’ tendencies of left theory, but is institutionally safeguarded in pseudo-literary disciplines such as ‘subaltern’ and ‘gender and transnational studies’. To interrogate post-colonialism, we begin with Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, because it was almost single-handedly (if unintentionally) responsible for establishing (or at least giving shape to) a meta-theoretical formula for post-coloniality. *Orientalism* because the Ur-text of post-colonial studies.

In *Orientalism*, Said turned his magisterial faculties of literary critique back upon the Western canon itself—without which, it should be said, Said’s own critical method and democratic humanism are unthinkable. It was precisely this lineage in Walter Benjamin, Erich Auerbach, Theodor Adorno and even Marx himself that largely defined Said’s life and intellectual flourishing as a prolific author and professor of literary studies at Columbia. And it was more than that—Said was able to marshal these humanistic and critical forces in defense of Palestine and against the politics of dispossession. Indeed, humanism was the only ‘-ism’ to which Said ever affiliated. And he was never static in his commentary, often turning reflexively and critically against

previously held assumptions and beliefs (*i.e.* in his disenchantment with the post-Oslo peace process or his castigation of the corruption and moral hypocrisy of Fatah and the Palestinian leadership). Most trenchant were his clear-sighted denunciations of the unbridled brutality of the Zionist military occupation, colonization and subjugation of Palestine—a view he held while simultaneously pouring himself into gentle and sentimental forms of reconciliation as in the East-West Divan orchestra, a collaboration between Palestinian and Israeli musicians.

In *Orientalism*, Said put forward an argument that the body of representations of the ‘Orient’ functioned to exclude the ‘Orientals’ from humanism’s purview while simultaneously safeguarding humanism’s supposed universalist pretensions. The representations spanned the gamut. Behold the Orientals, living like animals, uncivilized, barbaric, licentious, and needing our paternal protection to bring them into modernity. But behold, too, the Orientals, exotic and alluring and enchanting. In whatever case, Said alleges that all representations of the Orient, spanning the entire canon, are a part of the same system. Said was to allege that the configuration of the Oriental ‘other’ was trans-historical (from the beginnings of Western civilization until now); trans-occupational (from literary figures to proto-social-scientists to tradesmen to military men); trans-socio-economic (from the aristocrats to the plebeians); and trans-political (from humanist-feminists like Jane Austen to old Ottoman history specialists like Bernard Lewis). All of this added up to a static and unitary, unchanging and inalterable trans-subjective failure of Western imagination and liberal universalism. No matter one’s political inclinations, one’s social standing, no matter if one’s occupation gives license to the literary or the imperative to science, no matter the space or time one occupies in the span of Western civilization... Orientalism was a constant and permanent aspect of Western discourse—perhaps an epistemic law. Under the heady

influence of Foucault, Said was to dub that system or epistemic law: ‘Orientalism’.

Said endeavored then to critique Orientalism (which so apparently transgressed the universality of liberalism) while rehabilitating and preserving humanism, and hence, the integrity of the Western canon itself. From the standpoint of humanism itself, would revealing Orientalist texts to transgress humanism lead to the rehabilitation of humanism by urging its adherents to be more inclusive...? Such a project naturally extended beyond the strictly literary—as Said argued that through inter-textual dialogue and contestation natives could (or would) gain entrance to a democratic sphere of rights and be recognized as rights-bearing subjects. It would be possible to simply contrast this kind of optimistic idealism (to borrow a phrase from Said, ‘humanism and democratic criticism’) with a pessimistic and nihilistic idealism in post-colonial studies, which is anti-foundationalist and fundamentally opposed to the truth and universality of the Enlightenment grand narrative. In other words, there was an internal contradiction on Said’s *Orientalism* and the historicist reception and appropriation of *Orientalism* described in the following chapter. Against the meta-narrative that underlies Said’s defense of humanism and democratic criticism is the anti-narrative portended by deconstructivism: the assertion of a multiplicity of fractured, colonized, decentred and furtively anti-colonial nativisms.

Now, one could ask: could Said’s ‘humanism and democratic criticism’ be part of a reflexive liberalism, a liberalism which is self-critical and thus always improving? Is a defense of Orientalism really a defense of liberal philosophy...? Such a question extends beyond textuality, and it is indeed only in the relationship between text and the social world that the systemic nature of Orientalism as a regulating imperial ideology can be understood and critiqued... but is the critique something which should properly be restored to liberal philosophy or to historical materialism? One of Said’s books is

entitled *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, and the nature of the relationship between those three is indeed the lynchpin of authentically political literary critique. Whether implicit or explicit, all literary critique which claims to be political must touch upon this relationship. The question becomes, how is the critic, whose purview is over texts, to advance such a relationship? The most natural choice for the critic would be *heuristically*, since to do more than this is to venture into political theory or philosophy. If so, it will almost definitely necessitate a political appropriation, which, unless meticulously considered and enacted, could bear a world of unforeseen/unintended consequences. Despite the many redoubtable forwards to new editions of *Orientalism*, and despite the publication of *Culture and Imperialism*, Said never redressed the terrible and disordered misadventures and misreadings *Orientalism* engendered across academic ‘disciplines’—literary studies, anthropology, ethnography, social history and the humanities mostly, but ‘traveling’ even into the occult domains of medieval studies, international relations theory, *etc.*

Let us return for a moment to the question of political literary critique. Theoretically formalized, it can be thought of as a particular subset of political theory broadly concerned with the relationship between thought and capitalism/imperialism, and particularly of the relationship between theory and capitalism/imperialism. The pioneer of political literary critique was none other than Karl Marx himself. Marxist literary critique—which itself is a particular inflection of the much broader Marxist tradition of *Ideologiekritik*—is itself founded upon the theoretical and methodological armature of *The German Ideology* and *Capital*. The influence of many of the luminaries of the Marxist tradition of political literary critique (Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno to Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson) appear either explicitly footnoted or else implicitly present in Said’s commentaries.



It is worth asking why Said did not root himself in this lineage and theoretical perspective when he wrote *Orientalism*. Perhaps it was the fact that Marxism then was so tied up in the question of ‘ideology’—a term which was fast degenerating into a hackneyed and theoretically indeterminate notion hardly worth the paper it was written on. This made adopting an explicit Marxist posture unattractive, far too gauche for sophisticated literary-academic company in the 1970s and 1980s. By this time Marxism had fast become an anachronistic caricature of itself in a strident new era of post-modernism and neo-liberalism. Surely Said did not want to pigeonhole himself as a Marxist literary critic for fear of marginalization, but also perhaps because of his inherent dislike of the crude anti-humanist and Stalinist implications of the structural Marxism which prevailed in the preceding post-war and early Cold War era. Of course he also disliked received traditions—blind and uncritical obeisance to any kind of political authority or way of thinking that needed to be ‘enforced’. Despite the fact that Edward Said’s scholarship pre-*Orientalism* was heavily and explicitly influenced by Marx yet he opted for philosophical novelty formulated *against* the Marxist conception of ideology when he wrote *Orientalism*. He turned to Foucault in order to frame Orientalism in terms of a conjunction of ‘knowledge and power’. Given the alluring promise of Foucauldian alchemy for the purposes of such a political critique, Said drank heavily of the potion of the knowledge/ power nexus. His true intent had been to critique the ideology of an empire through a real political history of empire. The actual effect could be more accurately described as an attempt to deconstruct Western ‘knowledge’ production on the Orient while simultaneously re-enacting textually the web of Western ‘power’ over the Orient. The two modes are in appearance quite similar but in reality they are politically antithetical (the former historical materialism the latter historicism). And this is borne out by the flood of idealist, anti-humanist and

postmodern/post-positivist appropriations of Orientalism in the social sciences which followed in the decades after its original publication and for which Said offered many belated and strenuously ineffective apologies.

The major problems inherent in an appropriation of Foucault in the name of humanism and emancipation are essentially twofold. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Foucault philosophically ratifies the ruination of science, and therein lies the first major problem for Said—which was quite a problem enough. But above and beyond epistemological skepticism, Foucault profaned scientific knowledge as nothing but an ‘effect of power’—a power, we will see, which is not the power Said intended—and therein lies the second major problem.

The following section examines just how Foucault gives science a philosophical death, and how he then goes on to philosophize knowledge as power. With this understanding we will see how Foucault’s project theoretically reverberates in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and in post-colonialism itself.

#### **3.4. Profaning Science: Foucault’s Knowledge/Power Nexus**

Science requires a philosophical safeguard to secure the prerogative of truth for humanity—a principle which was first formalized by Kant as modern epistemology. The core of Kantian epistemology is an account of transcendental reflection, through which subjective man can obtain an objective perspective on the world. The objectivity of knowledge is thereby the specificity of scientific knowledge. Although contested, it seems that modern epistemology still can’t do without an account of transcendental reflection. For Foucault, epistemology is the hiding place for science’s dirty little secret, its transcendent remainder. For Foucault, science’s transcendent remainder revealed it to be not so very different from religion. In both, truth claims are philosophically secured

via some rendition of transcendental access, but neither, for Foucault, actually have anything to do with reality, truth, objectivity.

Incidentally, even if we accept Foucault's rejection of transcendental access, can physics be defended without metaphysics (can science be defended without philosophy)? There are certainly empiricists who manage very well. What bearing does cognition have in physics in the quantum age? Does cognition require reality, theory, philosophy? Is physics still materialist? If so, how has our understanding of materialism been altered? New mathematical techniques were developed to handle quantum indeterminacy in theory, while the philosophical questions faded, once again, into the background, waiting for the next scientific revolution to reappear. Perhaps cognitive neuroscience holds radical prospects for epistemology. For social scientists in the twentieth century, on the other hand, the question of transcendental reflection is impossible to ignore. Its gravitational effect upon social theory is immense, as presently manifest in the preponderance of 'subjectivity' in social theory. Social theory is conceived in terms of subjectivity, and here the theorist herself is a subject, perhaps an object of her own theory, but regardless, something that must be methodologically accounted for. She must objectivize other subjectivities, and also her own. To fail at the former is to be doomed to empiricism and to reify the social world. To fail to objectivize one's own subjectivity is to produce a subjective theory, which (supposedly) would be biased, limited, potentially inadmissible. Transcendental reflection need not be formulated around the object/subject binary, but for now this is how it prevails in social-scientific theory. So the presence of subjects and objects, subjectivities and objectivities, and subjectivization and objectivization in a theory is a clear signal of transcendental reflection. In political theory, the question of transcendental reflection bears heavily upon our approach to theory and politics.

In any case, Foucault's project was to create a philosophy without transcendence and for him that meant the epistemic ruination of science. It seems he was no more interested in rehabilitating science than in rehabilitating religion. So knowledge was unmoored from objectivity. With the implosion of science, ontology, too, was unmoored from materialism, and returned to the realms of pure philosophy. Foucault endeavored to create a philosophy of power *à la* Nietzsche where everything was to be rendered an effect of power, and the only constraint was to philosophize without transcendence (perspectivism). Epistemology, and its transcendent core, was for Foucault the key to philosophically elaborating relations of power. Because epistemology is no longer singular, Foucault encouraged the adoption of *epistemes* each one characterized archaeologically as an 'age'. Just as our familiar modern epistemology is accompanied by scientific disciplines, theories, and scientific discourse, each episteme has its own variations on this theme. While the episteme is seen as the basic strategy of power in a given age, its discourses are the multitudinous tactics of power, articulating power into the 'who, what, where, when, why, and how' of history. The more discourses, the more intricate, tangled, labyrinthine the configuration of power.

Let us now consider the modern episteme from Foucault's theoretical perspective. The basic strategy of the modern episteme is the Subject, simultaneously transcendental and empirical. It is transcendental in its capacity to objectivize and know, empirical in objectivization via knowledge. In the modern episteme, a given discourse articulates a specific relation of power through simultaneous subjectivization and objectivization. The subject-pole has power over the object-pole because of its ability to objectivize, and hence to *know* it. The subject alone can generate knowledge of this particular power relation, which then continues the articulation of a power-relation. A

subject of one discourse, of course, may be the object of another. We can voice this claim as follows:

Insofar as I am subjectivized, I have power—insofar as I am objectivized, I am the object of power. My familiar sense of self, my “I”, is but the conjunction of many discourses. My knowledge, then, is limited to my subjectivity. I can only gain a knowledge of those discourses of which I am the subject. If I am to resist a discourse of which I am the object, I will have to do so without a knowledge of that discourse. I certainly cannot theorize the totality of power relations (unless, apparently, I am the Subject of all discourses, of the episteme itself), and I can certainly not trans-epistemically theorize.

To claim to transcend the episteme, or to have trans-epistemic prominence, can only signal yet another emergent strategy of power. This is very interesting given that Foucault himself seems to have (granted to himself) meta-epistemic intuition. That indeed, will become a part of our story. Because objectivity and subjectivity are the peculiarity of the modern episteme, when ours is toppled by the next, these too will disappear. Foucault’s philosophic ruination of science thus entails the eventual death of the Subject (which Foucault so famously announced and which seems eerily reminiscent of Marx’s claim that a communist society would require a ‘new man’).

Finally, what of emancipation in Foucault? Emancipatory theory must necessarily theorize the totality of power relations. Theorizing a totality seems impossible if we, like Foucault, were to rebuff transcendental reflection. The impasse can be voiced as follows:

My knowledge is limited by my subjectivity, which means that certain relations of power (of which I am the object) are always un-knowable to me. We are all trapped in our respective subjectivities.

Further still, perhaps emancipation cannot be herein conceptualized or theorized as a function of the subject, given that the subject itself will be obliterated through epistemic “emancipation.” So, perhaps emancipatory theory must encode the “new man” to replace the subject after we are emancipated from the modern episteme.

But even then, how could such a theory emerge from modern subjects, trapped in their subjectivities? As mentioned above, Marx also said that communism required a ‘new man’... yet from the Foucauldian perspective Marxism failed as ‘emancipatory theory’ because it was still an ‘Enlightenment theory’ (an archaeological relic or artifact of a given era) despite its claim to be progressive, revolutionary, dialectical.

Given all of this, it seems certain that even if emancipation could be theorized from a Foucauldian perspective,<sup>33</sup> it could only be emancipation from the present episteme, whose toppling would only make way for another episteme, another configuration of power. Could anything at all be said at the normative level about one episteme being at least *better* than another in some sense? Could we even apprehend anything beyond our own episteme? And would such normative statements be entirely dependent upon subjectivity? Foucault’s theory pushes us towards a certain radical kind of heterophenomenology wherein every episteme (and perhaps every subjectivity) is some kind of alien singularity.<sup>34</sup>

From Foucault’s perspective, any assertion of emancipatory theory can only be the machinations of yet another strategy of power seeking to topple and replace the modern episteme. It has no other content. Emancipatory theory could only be an attempt at an epistemic coup. If we assume that the formulation of emancipatory theory within our own episteme can only ever be ‘modern’ then emancipatory theory is never really emancipatory but is really just an attempt at replacing the oppressor with the oppressed,

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<sup>33</sup> Via some kind of non-transcendental epistemology, through theorization beyond subjectivity...

<sup>34</sup> It would not be at all surprising for a Foucauldian speaking from a Western epistemic basis to conjecture that an ‘Islamic episteme’ or ‘Arab episteme’ is somehow alien and unknowable... although such conjecture would be baseless given that the existence of something which is alien and unknowable by definition cannot be proven to exist... unless one believed that elementary logic was only a strategy of power.

to reshuffle power, but still within the same episteme and therefore with the same ultimate implication of successive imprisonment. Once again, here is where a Foucauldian would say that Marxism was just an Enlightenment theory, totalizing and hence claiming to be emancipatory, while its meta-historical standpoint is in actuality the posturing of power. It is just an attempt to reverse the present configuration of power. This is, incidentally, not unlike Hannah Arendt's accusation against Marx that he ended the tradition of Western political thought,<sup>35</sup> essentially by merging science (*i.e.* transcendence, totalities, grand narratives like emancipation) with political thought. Marxism was for Arendt the end of the line for Western political theory.

### **3.5. Left Theory and Partisanship in a Foucauldian Multiverse**

Given our sketch of Foucault's system, what remains for left theory, for resistance and struggle? Political conflict cannot be theorized *in toto*, but perhaps we could create a provisional map of its archipelagos, to enable tactical thinking. What could be on that map, given the subjective limitations of the mapmaker? It is impossible for her to objectivize her own subjectivity, or any other subjectivities—she can only objectivize the relations of power over which she presides. Perhaps the relative configuration of her subjectivization and her objectivization creates some instability, some propensity for the oppressed even while she is a subject. Perhaps she will seek out counter-discourses, emergent from the dominated, to re-subjectivize herself, in solidarity with the oppressed, and to circulate their power. Perhaps she will use her position to survey dominant discourses, even to theorize them, on behalf of the oppressed. For the oppressed, it seems that there is some theoretical dependence on

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<sup>35</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Promise of Politics*. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, 38.

friendly subjects for maps of power, but the spontaneously emergent counter-discourses would also be guide. The radical relational nature of power might also prove useful. But these provisional, provincial maps are all that remains for left theory, for resistance is not really a theoretical matter anymore. Theory has been almost completely uncoupled from politics.

There is one last point to be made, and it is perhaps the most important. Not only is resistance non-theorizable in Foucault, but it is entirely *discursive*. Discourse is completely untethered from the real, the material. There is much to explain and elaborate here, since this point has been so vulgarized in appropriations of Foucault, and since the ‘real’ and the ‘material’ have no unquestionable philosophical content. Let us say that for Foucault, political conflict has no material basis and is only discursively articulated (and moreover it seems impossible to theorize that articulation, beyond mere micro-theories). Our attempt at left theorization cannot escape the ominous knowledge/power nexus of the modern episteme and therefore has no truth content or revolutionary meaning—it is only a discursive phenomenon. Grand emancipatory theory has similarly been shattered by Foucault into a multitude of fragments, polarized for every kind of imaginable power relation: feminist theory, gender theory, queer theory, race theory... with its academic and pseudo-disciplinary corollaries in gender studies, ethnic and transnational studies, diaspora studies, subaltern studies... and in discursive terminologies such as governmentality, horizontality, post-coloniality and of course, Orientalism.

And what of partisanship in Foucault? What does it mean to take sides, in theory? Being a partisan of resistance in a Foucauldian multiverse means being subjectivized by the counter-discourse. If one were at first subjectivized by the dominant discourse, then to switch sides entails re-subjectivization by the counter-



discourse, which one could then propagate (hence partaking in resistance?). We know that, 1) one's decision to take a side cannot be objectivized, 2) the social articulation of partisanship cannot be theorized, and 3) partisanship has no material basis. So, being on a side is just a matter of discourse just as politics itself is a discursive panoply. Because (as shown above) there can only be tactical thinking, one's partisanship is provincial and reduced to local identitarian or culturalist forays. Having taken a side (due to whatever inscrutable inclination) one is now propagating a discourse which may appear to be 'resistance', 'dissidence, a challenge to authority... and yet partisanship is really just a kind of sentimentalism because it has no material basis: it is a 'predilection' only. The partisanship of your theory is only a result of the fact that your theory is subjective, and hence shares your 'predilection' (or 'filiation'). Worse still, this predilection (for nativism, dissidence, radical thought, post-modern discourse, *etc.*) has the unfortunate quality of being entirely fashionable and even amenable to the mainstream for the simple reason that tolerating dissidence is part of the democratic ideology of the liberal academic elite (the guardians of certain fundamental liberal rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of academic inquiry, *etc.*). As long as it is harmless (*i.e.* not truly revolutionary) it can be tolerated and even tacitly encouraged—this is evidenced by the publication of 'radical' 'post-modern' journals funded and operated under the aegis and imprimatur of mainstream educational institutions. An example of this would be the 'dissident' journal of International Relations (IR) theory, *Millennium* (published by the London School Economics) or in Middle East Studies, the 'critical' *Journal of Palestine Studies*, published by the University of California Press.

### **3.6. Orientalism and its Discontent**

Let us now return to the question of Said and *Orientalism*. Certain aspects of

Foucault's philosophy were undoubtedly compelling to Said. Foucault's attack on truth as nothing but an effect of power might have seemed akin to Said's own critical imperative to rub every perceived truth against the grain. Critical discourse, then, could denude the power of truth, and critique could be seen as discursive intervention. At his best, Said wielded critique with determination and indignation, a weapon that could sting the oppressor and embolden the oppressed. Foucault's rendition of critique (counter-discourse) however, was a world apart from this weapon of criticism. The first problem was that Foucault's attack on truth was not merely heuristic, as was Said's 'humanism and democratic criticism'. Foucault did not merely correlate truth and power; he philosophically conjoined them in a space that was beyond good and evil. How could Said truly abide to live in such a morally inert space? The second problem was Foucault's philosophical conception of power. His power was certainly not the power of the maxim, "speak truth to power," often associated with Said—unless by truth we mean only the relative counter-truth, for truth is always already power and worse, a perspectival web of power relations. Further, Foucault's philosophy of power allowed for neither ontological nor epistemological discrimination between resistance and domination (in Nietzschean terminology, again, power is beyond good and evil, like 'will' and 'drive'). In Foucault there is no real or objective difference between the two (the difference between the two is entirely subjective) whereas the Edward Said of *The Politics of Dispossession* (1995), there is equal measure of the provisional humility of his gentle humanism as well as the ardent and uncompromising conviction of his democratic criticism. His judgment of the history of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict is not portrayed as a mere discursive intervention but as a historical truth. Herein lies the contradiction between Said's 'humanism and democratic criticism' and Foucault's 'historicism'.

In any case, Said appropriated Foucault in *Orientalism* and the resulting perspective was formalized, stylized and expounded in later academic discourse. Orientalism was portrayed as a discourse of the modern episteme and as a modern discourse Orientalism simultaneously articulates two poles of a power relation: the Western subject and its non-Western object. The Western subject is constantly re-articulating this power relation through Orientalism. Orientalism naturalizes the West's dominance over the Orient. The Western subject 'naturally' seems to be civilized, in possession of knowledge, while the native is intrinsically backwards and without knowledge. From this epistemic inscription, the paternalistic political philosophies of colonialism are but a step away.

Yet one could ask, what *is* the power relation actually articulated by Orientalism? Is it colonialism? Insofar as the most basic antagonism of colonialism is between West and non-West, then colonialism seems to be articulated by Orientalism. However, in Said's account, Orientalism commences long before modern colonialism, in the very origins of Western civilization. What could that mean? For post-colonialists, it reveals the West's dirty little secret: that the formation and development of Western subjectivity was entirely dependent upon the existence of the backwards unknowing uncivilized barbaric native. Thus the Oriental is often dubbed the West's 'Other' in post-colonial discourse, powerless, unknowable, distorted, caricatured, morphologically deformed in literature, anthropology, music, art, *etc.* Orientalism was the discourse that created the native 'Other' as a discursive object and this in turn enabled the conception and validation of the civilized Western subject. This line of reasoning assumes that the West's 'discovery' of the Orient was instrumental (if not the sufficient cause of) its own rise to power. Both the Western subject and the native 'Other' were discursively articulated by Orientalism. In this way the West became synonymous with civilization,

enlightenment, modernity, knowledge, science, *etc.*, so Orientalism is not just any discourse: *it is the most foundational discourse of the modern episteme, articulating the most basic distinction of the modern era—construed in Western subject vs. native other binary.* This Western subject, articulated by Orientalism, is the very Subject of Kantian epistemology, the crux of modernity. While the Western Subject is still the object of a multitude of power relations internal to the West, every Westerner, no matter how debased in Western society, still has power over the native. And it is upon that foundational power relation that all of modernity rests (or so it is claimed via Foucault).

Interestingly, the uncivilized natives, as a group, are alone poised to topple the entire episteme, and you might say that is their one privilege. Following this abstract line of thought, might we claim that they might constitute the party of the revolution...? Even if the answer were « yes », there could never be any such party in Foucault's ontology given that a party needs a theoretical basis: first to recognize and constitute itself as the party of the revolution, and second to have a political strategy (its goal, objectives, program, *etc.*). Here we arrive at the same now familiar impasse in Foucault: revolutionary theory is impossible given that natives are trapped within their own subjectivities. Therefore the hope of the wretched of the earth cannot rest upon theory. Resistance can only be tactical, and it is upon that which their hopes must rest. Perhaps in addition there will be Western defectors bearing knowledge of metropolitan secrets and insights into the internal instabilities of the empire. Perhaps the spontaneous emergence of native knowledge production at the peripheries of empire will one day lay siege to the center. Meanwhile, what of the natives who have themselves travelled to the metropole, many of them successful and well-established, transformed into transnational elites by their immersion in the Western episteme... do they continue to represent the 'other'...? Does any native who has conducted dialogue with West

(having learned something of its culture, traditions, language, science, technology, *etc.*) have any longer any claim to non-Western subjectivity or is she tainted in some way, permanently robbed of fundamental heterodox otherness and gathered into the web of power relations which constitute the present order of things? For the natives left behind (if the native 'Other' can indeed exist in a globalized and inter-connected world) who is their friend and who is their enemy...? It should now have become clear that attempting to adopt a Foucauldian emancipatory theory is obviously untenable and even contradictory. Partisanship is lost in Foucault, and without partisanship, the designation of a theory as 'left' (or 'emancipatory) is an aesthetic gesture without material foundation.

### **3.7. Considering a Limited Partisanship**

Neither Said's Orientalism nor post-colonial theory can claim the mantle of left theory. Edward Said intended to be a partisan of the natives (the Palestinians). We know now that such emancipatory partisanship is impossible within a Foucauldian framework for all the reasons discussed in the previous section, but let us consider a more limited sort of partisanship.

First, how is partisanship vis-à-vis colonialism theoretically formulated by Said? He argues that colonialism, which has no material determinations, is discursively articulated by Orientalism. Political subjectivization within colonial conflict has no material basis, nor can it be objectivized. A Western subject might feel a predilection to take the side of the wretched native, because he was exposed to Marxist discourse, because he read Orientalism, because he is trying to rehabilitate his beloved liberalism, because one of his parents was an immigrant from an oppressed colony, *etc.* In whatever case, that choice is non-objectivizable. Furthermore, that partisanship is *discursive*,

bearing no material determination or material consequence. Clearly, this is not partisanship at all; it is merely some kind of arbitrary re-inscription of one of the extant effects of power within a complex of effects. Said's own partisanship can be described perhaps as sentimentality for the underdog, and it is merely that sentimentality that is imparted to his theory. It is not partisan theory; it is sentimental theory. It definitely cannot be called emancipatory. And if you call it anti-colonial theory, then Foucault would remind you that you are proposing one discourse over another (colonialism)—a tactical intervention but one that exists only on the plane of discourse.

To claim that colonialism is a discourse which defined the object (the colonial) is a way of thinking about empire that we cannot accept from the standpoint of historical materialism—and doubtless Said did not accept that ideas alone constituted the order of things. Said would never accept that there are no material determinations of the conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis, nor that liberation of Palestinian land will be a purely discursive affair. It was for these reasons principally that Said was to become disillusioned with Foucault. While Edward Said might believe that discourse is one important tactic of resistance, it is not the reality or ultimate hope of resistance. At the same time it would be true to say that while he hopes for universal emancipation (in the best humanist tradition) he doesn't think that there is a singular theory of emancipation. He was definitely against totalizing theories, and every -ism. He believed in the political power of knowledge, culture, dialogue, contestation, of persuasion and criticism—coincidentally the very purview and responsibility of the critic—and struggled all of his life to win over the hearts and minds of his American and European audience. It would therefore be more accurate to describe Said as an ethical and voluntarist idealist; and it would not be wrong to call this tendency 'liberal'. In fact his 'humanism and democratic criticism' is utterly compatible with the liberal program of

multiculturalism and tolerance and the liberal project of the open society where everyone is free to speak her own 'truth'. That liberalism is in a way also compatible with Foucault's philosophy, but only in the way that absolutely any political tendency is compatible with Foucault's philosophy. It is not clear if this limited partisanship (liberal idealism) is convincing in and of itself, let alone within a Foucauldian framework.

And how has the Foucauldian framework inflected in post-colonialism and left scholarship more generally? While some have interpreted Foucault's work to mean that only texts and discourses should be studied, given the discursive articulation of power, this is a vulgar interpretation. For Foucault, the relation between humans and the objects of the natural sciences is also one of power. Foucault himself believed that his philosophy of power must eventually draw in the natural sciences. He began with the human sciences only because the effects of power were easier to detect therein. Foucault begins with the subjective, while the objective lies in wait. If the natural sciences were to be drawn into Foucault's philosophy, what would be the consequences to political theory? The objects of the natural sciences would be coupled with subjects of the social sciences. The philosophy of the natural sciences, then, might be inflected into political theory in some non-trivial way. Furthermore, even if power and resistance are discursive, surely social objects, shaped by man, must be taken into account. Foucault certainly does that. Discourse is not just textual for Foucault, because the articulation of discourses articulates subjects of power, and induces these subjects to create instruments of power. While these objects are still ultimately discursive for Foucault, and can't be said to have any real material bases, they do objectively exist for the subject. Political theory, then, might still have objective determinations, even while these have no material moorings. They cannot just be ignored because they are not apparently discursive from our subjective standpoint. Despite this, as the interest in

discourses and epistemes has been propagated from theory to discourse to general tendency, it has been vulgarized. Consequently, only discourses are of methodological concern and students of Foucault seem to assume that politics can be theorized entirely from literary-deconstructive examinations of discourse. The post-colonial correlate of this vulgarization goes something like this: resistance is discursive, so we should help natives/colonials rehabilitate their own indigenous narratives, their own cultural wisdom, in an effort to strengthen the power of their institutions versus the imperial order. Presumably, an authentic native subjectivity could then emerge, and with it some kind of 'alternative modernity' which could somehow shake the foundations of the Western episteme. Of course it is not at all clear how this alternative modernity would function politically (or exist at all) without logic, reason, truth, science, technology, mathematics, *etc.* which are in this view of the Western knowledge/power nexus *subjective discursive phenomena/strategies of power that cannot be wielded by the native from his xeno-epistemic location.*

### **3.8. Re-Asserting Materialism and Partisanship**

Having considered the unlimited consequences of a Foucauldian multiverse, what follows now is a positive re-assertion of several diametrically opposed assertions: 1) that political antagonism has material moorings in the world, 2) that it is possible, through materialist science, to gain an objective knowledge of political conflict, and 3) that such a science will be intrinsically partisan. These three points constitute the philosophical foundations of historical materialism, which for simplicity's sake can be referred to as just 'materialism'. The argument can then be advanced that emancipatory partisanship is secured only by materialism, and that really, partisan theory is necessarily materialist theory. While it may appear to be radical and avant-garde, post-



colonialism is not materialist and therefore not emancipatory.

Materialism signifies not only the rehabilitation of science in political theory, but specifically science that is intrinsically partisan. Against Foucault's reduction of history to discourse, materialism asserts the real material determinations of history. Against Foucault's rendition of power relations that are non-objectivizable, materialism asserts their objectivizability. Against Foucault's reduction of partisanship to filiation, materialism rehabilitates the material bases and objectivizable determinations of partisanship. Against Foucault's reduction of politics to tactics, materialism asserts a strategic (meta-historical) politics of truth.

### **3.9. What Is The 'Matter' of Materialism?**

What does the materialism of historical materialism have to do with what we typically think of as 'matter', which is the matter under examination by the natural sciences? What does it mean for history to have real, material determinations? Where are we to look for the real movement of history? What is the real matter of history there our scientists are to study? Are they to be empiricists? The answer to these questions lies in the eventual unification of natural history and human history, as suggested by Marx's oft-quoted maxim (actually crossed out from *The German Ideology*) that history is the last science. In this view, the social sciences require the natural sciences because the 'matter' of the social sciences must be moored to the physical matter of the natural sciences. The epistemology of the social sciences must be moored, at the very least, to the cognitive neurosciences. Given our negligible knowledge of the articulation between the social sciences and the natural sciences, perhaps the "matter" of the social sciences should probably utilize a different term ('social' ...?) In any case, the very condition of possibility for the separation of the social and the natural sciences is the phenomenon of

human consciousness, and that it is of course what makes the social sciences so impossibly difficult to formulate. All of the sciences, of course, contain this philosophical remainder (which was Foucault's very point of departure—but let us put that aside). The social sciences must be mediated by a philosophy of consciousness and an epistemology which are in turn mediated by the various sciences of the mind. Arguably, the category of consciousness in philosophical and epistemic terms is inflected into historical materialism as some sort of abstraction, simultaneously operative in the epistemic, theoretical, and political facets of historical materialism.

So what of materialist philosophy, given the limitations of science presently? Can a materialist epistemology include transcendental reflection? How can materialist theory mediate that transcendence? These are all philosophical questions, and they can only be fleetingly considered within the confines of this preliminary study. Our endeavor here is primarily critical: to expose the falsity of the partisan pretensions of post-colonialism. That critique precipitated the staging of a contestation between materialism and idealism, which necessarily turns into philosophical problem. It will require us to survey contestations over materialist epistemology and materialist partisanship, and perhaps even to question how these are inflected into the theoretical conception of ideology. However, this work would be most useful if it could also develop a materialist heuristic. Such a heuristic would help potentially radical materialist scholars in (Middle East studies) avoid the idiomatic idealist tendencies of post-colonialism. This effort can begin by setting out the various hostilities and antagonisms between materialism and idealism.

In order to characterize the nature of this contestation between materialism and idealism—a contestation that is simultaneously political, epistemic, and theoretical—it will be necessary to re-read *The German Ideology* by Marx and Engels, and

*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* by Lenin. These texts are partly polemical, but they also represent the earliest advances in Marxist theory and philosophy. Their relevance today lies in the spirited critique of their rivals' idealism, the counter-intuitiveness of the assertion that those who claimed and even intended to be radical and avant-garde were anything but—and worse, that their political effect of their activism was retrograde and even counter-revolutionary. These polemics were heuristically important for the development of materialism, theoretically if not also philosophically.

*The German Ideology* was arguably the series of texts that formalized the antagonism between idealism and materialism. While it was largely polemical, against Marx's intellectual and political rivals, it did develop the beginnings of Marx's materialist conception of history, which would lay the theoretical foundation for a new science of history. In critiquing the idealism of the utopian socialists, Marx also developed his foundational insights into materialist politics and ideology. It is curious to note that the idealist deformations of Marx's conception of ideology have become theoretically pervasive, in conjunction with the dismissal of *The German Ideology* as outmoded and positivist. There is certainly great irony in that.

Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is a work that contains an attempt to develop Marxist philosophy, and particularly a materialist theory of knowledge. Under Stalin, it was used to instrumentalize the antagonism between materialism and idealism, in order to police idealist deviations amongst the intelligentsia, and to justify internal Stalinist policies as the revolutionary imperative of materialism. The text, consequently, has been construed as totalitarian propaganda. Amongst Western Marxists, it is dismissed as untenable for its reflection theory of knowledge, and even for the supposed reason that Lenin himself rejected the text, after reading Hegel. It is still a foundational text in materialist epistemology, and particularly in conjunction with

a reading of Lenin's philosophical notebooks. Both texts are significant from the standpoint of being tentative but concrete theoretical and philosophical advances in materialism. They also provide the original form and method that continues to be played out in any materialist critique of idealism. In addition, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* introduced a full conception of partisanship—the lynchpin of materialism.

### 3.10. Partisanship and Theory

There is a point to be made in staging this contestation between Foucault (vis-à-vis post-colonialism) and materialism. Consider that Foucault's historicism might be regarded as the radical continuation of Jameson's Marxist injunction to "always historicize".<sup>36</sup> Perhaps epistemology was the one thing that Marxism never historicized, and perhaps if that is done, then historical materialism becomes untenable, and this is an implicit, though unelaborated, consequence of historical materialism itself. Foucault's historicism is in fact an implicit critique of Marx's historical materialism, and specifically of the materialism of historical materialism. One may draw the same intuition from Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. For Marx, history is the last science; while for Foucault, there is no science, only history. When materialism is expunged from historical materialism, what is left is historicism, which is truly the philosophical inverse of Marxism. And because Marx's materialism is the indefeasible safeguard of emancipatory theory and politics, Foucault's historicism is also the abnegation of the erstwhile program of the Left. The material moorings and objectivizability of political conflict are the peg upon which is staked all of the hopes of the exploited and oppressed classes Marxism, and they are utterly ruined by Foucault. Historicism is Marxism's

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<sup>36</sup> "...the one absolute and we may even say 'transhistorical' imperative of all dialectical thought..." *The Political Unconscious*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981, 9.

polar opposite, its idealist simulacrum. That simulacrum is simultaneously political, epistemic, and theoretical. Bringing together Said's appropriation of Foucault with Marxist materialism is not some abstractly contrived exercise. The appropriation of Foucault is objectively, I will argue, to take sides in the hostilities between materialism and idealism.

As a partisan of materialism, I claim that to appropriate Foucault is to become a partisan of idealism, necessarily against Marxist materialism. Given the materialist conjunction between theory and politics, this is a political accusation. To elaborate idealism in theory (even unwittingly) is to enact a political hostility. What is at stake in that political contestation is emancipatory politics. The fact that emancipatory pretensions so typically accompany historicist-inflected theory is important here, since it can only be ideological (let us say it embeds materialist scholars in a superstructural field characterized by a propensity to ask the wrong questions). The most important goal here is to see if materialism contains any advantage over idealism in this battle (or, can it help us ask the right questions?). Towards that end, we must consider the contestation from both the framework of materialism and of idealism. Is there complete parity? Or is there something real that privileges historical materialism?

From the standpoint of materialism, we find that materialism contains idealism, and this is the key to an important advantage over idealism. Idealism itself is objectivizable, and has real material determinations. Theorizing those determinations is an important part of the work of materialist theory. The contestation between idealism and materialism itself, then, is materially situated. It would also seem that the real existence of the material world would be materialism's greatest advantage. But is it?

From the standpoint of Foucault's idealism, one might claim that Marxism is the counter-discourse of historicism. Foucault would want to show how Marxism is

forged around a transcendental core. He might even have argued (in response to Sartre) that Marxism was the last bastion of the modern episteme. But would not Foucault's own philosophy appear as the counter-discourse of the modern episteme? And given that, must it not also contain a transcendental core, and be conceived in its own terms as just another assertion of power meant to topple modernity? And given that 'emancipation' in Foucault only means to topple an episteme then isn't historicism genuinely 'emancipatory'?

What if we partisans of materialism were to allege that Foucault is a partisan of the powerful, and what if we claimed this to be objective, and to have material foundations? What if Foucault returns the same allegation against materialism? What will determine the outcome of that conflict?

### **3.11. Materialist Contestations Against Said**

From a Foucauldian perspective, you might say that Said's book was inflected by his subjectivization by post-War left theory and the appropriation of the critique of reason—that his book consequently propagated this ideological tendency into the emergent discourse which we now refer to as post-colonialism. But given Said's bias towards emancipation, why did he select a theoretical perspective that disables emancipatory politics? And how would we go on to prove that Orientalism is idealist?

At the very least, one would have to be able to objectivize Said's political subjectivization, and reveal its material determinations. The critic would also have to objectivize her own political subjectivization, reveal its material determinations and that exercise will have to reveal why she is better able to 'transcendentally reflect' upon the conflict between materialism and idealism. If it were possible to complete such a task, then she would be able to separate out the theorists who are friends of emancipation

(materialists) from the theorists who are enemies of emancipation (idealists—ranging from liberals to reactionaries). If the claims of materialism are borne out, then her accusation would not be a mere polemical gesture for it would have the backing of a materialist science.

Let us be clear that the idealist tendency called ‘post-colonialism’ belies the hegemony of idealism over left theory today. If we are materialists, then we must understand this to be a fundamentally political problem. We must understand that it has real material determinations. So, what is to be done? That question requires an assessment of our present conjuncture, which itself, of course, requires historical materialism. The work of materialism, it would seem, is infinitely reflexive. And Marxist philosophy (and epistemology) it seems, is crucial to making sense of that. Of course some materialists will claim that all of this has been an abstract exercise which has no role in the movement of history and which is actually characteristics of the distractions of bourgeois theorists. Is a real partisan of materialism able to prove this claim wrong, in theory and in practice? The answer rests on the hopeful elaboration of Marxist philosophy. And if that cannot be done, then it seems that yes, indeed, this contestation between materialism and idealism really is just artificially construed, and has nothing to do with emancipation at all.

### **3.12. An Epilogue on the Fate of Post-War Marxism**

In appropriating Foucault’s skeptical epistemology, Edward Said was to disable the normative moment of his own political critique. Interestingly, Said was hardly the first to appropriate the critique of reason in the name of emancipation, as this was an innovation of the post-War left, and in particular, of Theodor Adorno and Max

Horkheimer.<sup>37</sup> It largely reflected disillusionment with Marxist theory and a pessimism which saw no opportunity for true revolutionary gains against two very stable forms of state capitalism in America and in the USSR. Western Marxists turned inwards, towards critique of Marxist theory, in search of an answer to what had gone so horribly wrong.<sup>38</sup> In light of Stalin's political instrumentalization of Marxism's status as a materialist science, and particularly Lenin's positivist rendition of it in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, the Western Marxists set their sights on the question of Marxist science. If Marxism was a science, then does this mean it is deterministic, teleological, reductive, economistic, subject-less...? What kind of science was it, or should it be? This self-interrogation led to at least three interrelated projects: the first one essentially critical, the second theoretical, and the third philosophical.

The first was epitomized by Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of Enlightenment rationality—which was really a critique of the reification of rationality and the consequent instrumentalization of reason. It was also in this context that Hannah Arendt fused together communism and fascism as (the left and right tendency of) 'totalitarianism', arguing that both were characterized by the introduction of reason into politics, the consequence of which is authoritarianism and social engineering. She would later lament that the tradition of liberal Western political thought ended with Marx, precisely because he had ended philosophy by bringing together science and emancipation. The now widespread influence of this critical affectation is manifested in how often Marx is dismissed so matter-of-factly as an Enlightenment intellectual who

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<sup>37</sup> Especially in Adorno and Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. (1969), ed. Noerr, transl. Jephcott, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002 (New York: Continuum, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> See Anderson, K. *Marx at the Margins: On nationalism, ethnicity, and non-western societies*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.



reduced politics to economics, or when ‘totalitarianism’ is asserted to be the logical endpoint and terrifying hypostasis of Enlightenment rationality, or finally, in general dissident academic contempt for the Enlightenment and modernity altogether.

The second project, inflected by the contestation just described, was fueled by the concern that Marxism had neglected the role of the ideational, and this was a large part of why the revolution had failed. While this tendency was not explicitly a contestation of Marxism as a science, the formulation of Marxist science hinged philosophically and theoretically on the inclusion of the ideational (a broader commitment to analysis of culture, superstructure and ideas). The prototypical example of this tendency was Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, which became the foundational text of Western Marxism.<sup>39</sup> It heralded the decline of the economic and the rise of the ideational in Marxist theory (the relationship between the base and the superstructure, the role of consciousness, knowledge, and culture in revolution, the reworking of emancipatory theory as a function of subjectivity, *etc.*)<sup>40</sup> The consequence of all of this, however—first inside but later outside of Marxist theory—was simply a generalized disinterest in the economy, and a newfound infatuation with anything that was neither economic nor apparently ‘material’.

The third and final project was the re-thinking of Marxist philosophy. For some, this was undertaken via a return to Hegel, or Kant, or ‘the young Marx’, and the question was of Marxism and philosophy, not of Marxist science and philosophy. For others, this neo-Kantian or neo-Hegelian turn was none other than an ‘idealist

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<sup>39</sup> See Lukács, G. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*. London: Merlin Press, 1971.

<sup>40</sup> Gramscian socio-political history is an example of this tendency, while world systems theory represented an attempt to fold post-coloniality and ‘globalization’ into a semi-materialist and non-Eurocentric research program.

deviation', and hence bourgeois. For these steadfast Marxist-Leninists, even in the shadow of Stalin, the question of science was still central, and the question of Marxist philosophy was inflected by Marxist science. Foremost amongst these was Althusser, who sought to rehabilitate Marxism's status as a materialist science by renovating Marxist philosophy, along with certain over-used and misapprehended theoretical concepts like 'ideology'.<sup>41</sup> Lenin's formulation of Marxist philosophy in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* was a touchstone for Althusser's project, as both Lenin and Althusser stood as steadfast partisans of materialism. Althusser was to adopt Lenin's bold allegation that all of philosophy was a contestation between materialism and idealism. So, what *is* the idealism of the neo-Kantians, and what *is* the materialism of Althusser? What is at stake in this contestation over Marxist philosophy?

### 3.13. The Parisian Police

“The Parisian police,” he said, “are exceedingly able in their way. They are persevering, ingenious, cunning, and thoroughly versed in the knowledge which their duties seem chiefly to demand.”

C. Auguste Dupin in *The Purloined Letter*, from *Tales of Mystery and Horror*, Complete Stories of Edgar Allan Poe, 131.

Now enter Foucault. Foucault was an erstwhile student of Althusser. He believed that the philosophical basis of science should remain central to Foucault's own philosophical project. However, Foucault was not to mount a philosophical defense of science, but to philosophically incarcerate it. As shown in this chapter, through a critique of Enlightenment reason, knowledge was uncoupled from objectivity, and philosophy was uncoupled from science. Post-modernity restored Subjectivity to the center of theory. Foucault's project was not apart from these developments. At first

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<sup>41</sup> The other anti-idealist strain of Marxism could be found in the structural Marxists who could be seen as strict economic determinists.

glance, it might have seemed that what Foucault was doing was sympathetic to the first and second projects described in the previous section. However, there were drastic differences. Foucault's critique of reason was nothing like that of Adorno and Horkheimer. Theirs was essentially a critique of reified rationality and instrumental reason *in contradistinction to dialectical reason*, while Foucault's critique was of reason *tout court*. And while the second project certainly refocused theory on the subjective, the subjective was never theoretically unmoored from the objective, nor was it detached from the material. Today, mired in the ideology of a post-modern academia, such subtle philosophical differences hardly matter, given that both the projects of Marxist self-assessment and Foucault's philosophy of power were inflected into the same general tendency. In political theory, this tendency is most succinctly characterized as the refusal of the conjunction of emancipation and rationality. It is philosophically manifest in the collapse of ontology into epistemology, theoretically manifest in theorization as a function of subjectivity and discursively manifest in the fracturing of history into an abundance of narratives. Cumulatively, it has brought about the fracturing of capitalism into an abundance of inter-subjective conflicts and the fracturing of the collective revolutionary subject into the multitude. In short, it is the abnegation of a strategic emancipatory politics of truth in favor of a tactical politics of subjectivity. This is a crushing setback for Marxism. What survived of Marxist theory was only a remnant: a toothless Marxian cultural theory, a polite Marxian literary theory, a liberalized social history that seeks ever to recover the lost voices of history and thereby to restore the dignity of the native within the context of Western multiculturalism and civic nationalism. Here at last we arrive at the real politics of

*Orientalism*.<sup>42</sup>

Foucault tries to disavow epistemology, since the very basis of his entire project is that epistemology, with its transcendental core, articulates power. So apparently his historicism is to be taken as some radical alternative to epistemology, in which the theoretical imperative to furnish an account of transcendental reflection has been averted. So Foucault produces his many genealogies, without ever articulating the conditions of possibility for this theoretical discourse. In historicism we are made to believe that there are no transcendental terms, as there are in epistemology. However, the very fact that Foucault produces a theoretical discourse, by way of his genealogies, means in actuality that what we have is disavowed reflection, wherein Foucault has surreptitiously granted himself the power of transcendental reflection, while refusing to

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<sup>42</sup> The real politics of *Orientalism* emerged through and within a global shift in the material configuration of post-war political economy, variously called ‘post-industrial capitalism’, ‘late capitalism’, ‘neo-liberalism’, ‘globalization’, and now ‘finance capitalism’. That reconfiguration had specific effects on the nations of the (so-called) Third World. The economic and political contestation between the US and USSR was largely staged in the Third World and carried out via proxy warfare. In the West, politicians demanded ‘development’, in the USSR, consolidation of socialist-nationalist economies. Whether through financial incentive or military coercion, the peoples of these regions fell subject to American grand areas and Soviet geo-strategy although they were by no means automatically passive or dependent in this relationship (consider the non-Aligned movement, or the manipulation of governments which simultaneously play one side against the other...) In any case, despite this bi-polarity, the overall movement of the twenty-first century can be felt in the emergence of empires, the expansion of capital, the migration of labor and the projection of patterns of commodities, consumption and social exchange worldwide—and the industrialization of the global south occurred via the de-industrialization of the West. To describe the vast scope of the historical-material determinations of *Orientalism* in the ‘post-industrial’ and ‘neo-liberal’ mode of late capitalism is beyond the scope of the present study but will be engaged in future research. Suffice to say, post-colonial theory is the insinuation of a theoretical tendency into third worldist left theory. The question of why this happened, or why Edward Said partook of it, is not one of blame, and I think that the tendency amongst Marxists to blame Said, in the liberal manner of personal responsibility, is quite un-materialist. The questions of why a post-war left appropriated the critique of reason, and why this propensity managed to impose itself over left theory, are intimately related to the articulation of politics and theory, which is the central concern of this thesis. The question will not be answered herein, but we will at least go a distance towards its proper formulation.

provide a theoretical account of this. Foucault does nothing to recognize or provide an account of this contradiction. As Habermas has pointed out, we never know how Foucault (or any Foucauldian) is able to study these epistemes—much less prior (historical) epistemes or non-Western epistemes, or alternate modernities for that matter. This seems to radically transgress the supposed precepts of his own historicism—not to mention the radical subjectivization (perspectivism) brought about by his theoretical rejection of truth/systemicity/rationality. The very fact that Foucault has a theoretical discourse which he has created (a body of thought that is apparently systemic) means that he has not disavowed rationality at all—as he claims to have done and as he enjoins his post-modern followers to do. His claim that he has disavowed rationality was important only because it gave him license (and what is apparently normative license—because he's disavowing rationality in the name of emancipation) not to have to articulate the conditions of possibility for his own theory. His attempt to escape the confines of rationality (which are taken as the chains of our oppression) is in fact none other than a retrogression to empiricism.

It is important to note that Foucault's followers may try to claim that historicism is more radically 'materialist' than even Marxism, because Marxism relies on abstractions like history and emancipation, while historicism does not. However, this belies a mistaken understanding about materialism, and about empiricism. As we saw in Chapter 2, materialism is not empiricist, in any theoretical context, whether the natural sciences or historical materialism, because of the constitutive role of abstractions in a materialist conception of knowledge. The process of abstraction is explicitly avowed in materialism, and, furthermore, a theoretical account for the process of abstraction is taken as the core imperative of materialist epistemology. This is precisely what is disavowed in historicism, since 'the universal' is always taken as an abstraction, and

since the production of abstractions requires an account of transcendental reflection. As discussed in Chapter 2, historical materialism includes a theory of real abstraction, wherein ‘the universal’ is taken as historically immanent, and a real abstraction as a singular universal. The refusal to include a conception of real abstractions, and to provide an account of their production, is precisely what makes historicism empiricist. The consequence is that it is impossible to abstract from the phenomenal complexity of power relations and fundamental social insight or explanatory framework such as that provided by class analysis. In Foucault, one can only know the ‘who, what, when, why and how’ of power relations.

Foucault’s empiricism is in fact ideological, in that it ends up being nothing but a supplement to liberalism, and an inadvertent re-inscription of the liberal conception of subjectivity. This is ironic given that the modern Subject—of the Enlightenment, of knowledge, of liberalism—is the quintessential target of Foucault and his followers, so that all Foucauldians will claim that they are radically anti-liberal. So Foucauldians study processes of subjectivization, claiming to historicize subjectivity. However, they have no theory of history, as Marxists do, such that their genealogies of subjectivity are in fact just catalogues of socio-historical contingencies. Further still, while they hold these processes of subjectivization to account for the oppressive reality of modern society, they have no positive conception of subjectivity, as the basis of a conception of ‘the social’ that is potentially not oppressive, but genuinely social. Remember that Marxists also renounce the conception of the liberal subject, recognizing that there is nothing more abstract than the liberal conception of the individual. We know that the individual rights-bearing subject is an ideological mystification of the social reality of human history. However, we also have a positive conception of species being, which is what enables us to critique liberal subjectivity in the first place. In historical

materialism, subjectivity implies a conception of 'the social', as the totality of social relations. In Foucault, on the other hand, we cannot talk positively about 'the social' because obviously this is against historicism. Any attempt to talk about 'society' *qua* the totality is taken as 'power' and something which radical scholarship contests, challenges, deconstructs. If it is not social it can only be socially atomistic or individualist. What this ends up being is really radical individualism. In the post-colonial variant this radical individualism manifests in the assertion or inscription of local identities and tactics as the only possible 'answer' to the dominant imperial discourse. Asserting nativist 'spaces of exception' (through art, literature, anthropology, etc.) is asserted in a way that could be described as a willful re-expression of power, identity, feeling, authenticity through difference. There is a useful parallel to be drawn here with Marx in his critique of Max Stirner in *The German Ideology* in which the rejection of the social reality of human history leads to a kind of ego-sensuous existentialism which authorizes the individual will to power and nothing more.

## CHAPTER 4

### AN AFTERWORD

“My interest in philosophy was aroused by materialism and its critical function: for *scientific* knowledge, against all the mystifications of *ideological* ‘knowledge’. Against the merely moral denunciation of myths and lies, for their rational and rigorous criticism.”

Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 1

#### 4.1. A Line of Demarcation<sup>43</sup>

This thesis began with a critical characterization of the political deficiencies of post-colonialism. It contested the radical pretensions of post-colonial Middle East Studies, arguing that post-colonialism is in actuality an ideological supplement to neo-liberalism. In other words, our contention is that post-colonialism is inscribed in the logic of neoliberalism despite its claim to be radical and dissident. In the wake of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*—taken herein as an instantiation of Foucauldian historicism—ostensibly critical intellectuals in Middle East Studies have increasingly engaged themselves in contestations over discourse and representation. This has turned an ideological antagonism into a placeholder for any more fundamental political antagonism. The production of endless catalogues of identity and inventories of culture has only sustained the false notion that historical transformation in the Middle East is contingent upon the deconstruction and authentication of cultural subjectivities. By asserting a methodological link between the post-colonialists and the Young Hegelians, critiqued by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, it was argued that the political

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<sup>43</sup> “...the master function of philosophical practice: ‘to draw a dividing line’ between true ideas and false ideas – Lenin’s word.” Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 8.



deficiencies of post-colonialism could be linked to the theoretical deficiencies of idealism. This critical link can only be articulated by materialist theory. Therefore, as a necessary preliminary to a politico-theoretical critique of post-colonialism, this thesis turned to an investigation of the conceptual basis of materialist theory, in contradistinction to idealist theory. In doing so, this thesis has endeavoured to develop the conceptual framework necessary in order to trace a line of demarcation between materialism and ideological tendencies of a liberal-humanist type that always threaten to overwhelm it. Through this endeavor, the aim was to conceptually substantiate the assertion that *the antimony of materialism and idealism on the theoretical plane corresponds to that of revolution and liberalism on the political plane.*

The reckoning of this thesis has hence been largely conceptual: to establish the line of demarcation between materialist theory and idealist theory. What has been the value of in demarcating this conceptual line of demarcation? The line of demarcation between materialism and idealism is unlike any other conceptual division, as underscored by the assertion, in Chapter 2, that there are but two fundamental, antagonistic tendencies in theory: materialism and idealism. This was the politics of theory. Crucially, this line of demarcation is fundamentally *antagonistic*, whereby it is meant that there can be no mediation or even peaceful co-existence between materialism and idealism. They are fundamentally antagonistic, and materialist contestations are hence necessarily antagonistic. Although materialism and idealism are taken as two fundamental, antagonistic tendencies in theory, the difference between materialist theory and idealist theory is not merely partial, such that they can claim to be two different kinds of theory, perhaps with different purposes or concerns. The line of demarcation between materialism and idealism distinguishes scientific knowledge from ideological ‘knowledge’, and what is at stake in the contestation between materialism

and idealism is the very conception of theory, as well as conception of the relationship between theory and politics. Central to the materialist conception of theory is the intelligibility of history, for it is only through this that the conception of emancipatory politics is possible. What is really at stake in the assertion of materialism is the conjunction of rationality and revolution. Idealism undermines this conception of rationality in all sorts of ways, ultimately abnegating the possibility of emancipatory politics. Materialism has not only a superior claim to emancipatory theory, but a superior epistemic claim to social theory generally. Materialism's superior claim to theory is substantiated by the fact that materialism can account for itself as theory, as well as for idealism as theory, through the conception of ideology. The conception of ideology maintains a crucial distinction between the apparent and the real, between pseudo-problems and real theoretical problems. The materialist critique of idealist tendencies can hence be conceptualized as a critique of empiricism. This underlies materialism's critical function: "against the merely moral denunciation of myths and lies, for their rational and rigorous criticism."<sup>44</sup>

The conception of antagonism is absolutely crucial to materialism. The conception of antagonism in theory is really secondary to the conception of real antagonisms that drive history. These antagonisms are objective and have real 'material' moorings. These are the basis for a conceptualization of real politics, in contradistinction to ideological conceptions of politics. The conceptual category of class is crucial in the politicization of theory, and class is taken as a real abstraction, or singular universal. The conceptual line of demarcation between materialism and idealism also articulates the line of demarcation between antagonistic classes, through a political epistemology. This is the basis for the conception of partisan theory, in which

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<sup>44</sup> Louis Althusser, as quoted in the epigraph to the present chapter.

an objective viewpoint is necessarily a partisan viewpoint.

From the standpoint of idealist theory, the very notion that there are two antagonistic tendencies in theory, or in practice—*i.e.* the very conception of partisanship—is unthinkable, and furthermore, an abomination. For this reason, the assertion of materialist contestations is never a ‘friendly’ gesture, amenable to polite academic discourse, and is necessarily polemical in part. In asserting a line of demarcation between materialism and the idealist tendencies that always threaten to overwhelm it, this thesis carries on, in a very modest way, a partisan tradition that began with Marx’s rupture with German idealism and Feuerbach’s humanism in *The German Ideology* (1846). This contestation between materialism and idealism is instantiated again in Engels’s struggle against Dühring in *Anti-Dühring* (1877), in Lenin’s long battle with the Russian populists in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* (1908) and in Louis Althusser’s incessant struggles against economics and ethical idealism in post-War left theory. Materialist contestations are always conjunctural, and therefore, as Fredric Jameson remarked, must “...always address a historical and political context, [...] to clarify the stakes, and to reveal any given conceptual debate as a struggle between idealist tendencies of all kinds and Marxian materialism.”<sup>45</sup> It is hoped that this investigation has laid the theoretical foundation for a future political critique of post-colonial Middle East Studies, from a standpoint that is both objective and partisan.

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<sup>45</sup> Jameson, Fredric, in the Introduction to Althusser, Louis. 2001. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. trans. Ben Brewster, New York: Monthly Review Press, viii.

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