

Historical Materialism: A Postdigital Philosophical Method



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1 Introduction

This chapter is interested in postdigital *research* rather than research in the postdigital *era*. On the one hand, the postdigital era is our current moment marked by the afterlife of the universalization of computerization and digitization. On the other hand, the postdigital is also a phase: something which comes and goes and is conceptual and philosophical in addition to literal. As Gabriel Rockhill maintains, eras mark ‘a historical time period’ whereas phases are ‘always distributed in a precise manner across time as well as in space and in society’ (2017: 4). The *concept* of the postdigital has always resisted any precise temporal placement. Petar Jandrić reminds us that ‘forms of binary code are found in ancient texts in China and India’, and that in an era long before written language, binary code was found ‘in various forms of communication such as smoke signals and drums’ (Jandrić 2019: 162). Even before the advent of the digital, we were somehow already past it, and with the postdigital.

Today, authors have agreed to agree on the spelling of ‘postdigital’, no hyphen. But in 2015, Geoff Cox was still messing with the ‘post-digital’. In an early essay on postdigital temporality, Cox questioned the need to announce a new era. Rather than ‘announce the end of this and that’, he said, we need to rethink how we approach time as researchers (Cox 2015: 151). Creating post this and that is historicist in ethic and not very postdigital (understood as a timeless phase rather than an era).

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For Cox, historicism is evidenced by ‘machine time’ which produces ‘a very particular view of history’ through storage and memory, in which ‘the central processor takes symbols from memory, combines or compares them with other symbols, and then restores them to memory’ (2015: 158–159). Machine time reasserts the present by continually reconceptualizing the past. Cox tasks historical materialism with critiquing ‘the inner workings of historicism as an ideological construction’ — to remind us that time too is an ideology. The method’s aim would be to ‘to maintain a political view of the past that is not simply a historical one’ but a political one as well (155). The marxist method, much to the surprise of its detractors, has been tasked with reminding historicism of the political agency of human subjects. In this chapter, we springboard off of Cox’s provocations and return to Marx and the communist tradition to demonstrate that historical materialism is the right method to be tasked with this duty, and maintain that historical materialism has always been a postdigital research method.

Put simply, in our search for methods of postdigital research, we offer up historical materialism as an old friend who has returned anew, one freed from the economic determinism, historical stageism, and linear developmentalism so often assigned to it. Historical materialism can find refuge in the philosophical world of postdigital research, and it can in turn contribute to postdigital research as one of the many methods to draw upon to investigate the crises that we are in. Ultimately, we present historical materialism and postdigital research as fellow travelers, as companions. Sometimes they crisscross paths, overlap, hold hands, and become one (as fellow travelers often do) and at other times they diverge and drift apart, though always with the option to come back together again.

The chapter proceeds as follows: first we explore the contours of historical materialism through its most popular iteration, the base-superstructure model. We find that a text-based understanding of the model moves us beyond its caricature and allows us to ask needed questions within postdigital research. In the second section, we continue an exploration of the base-superstructure model, and point to how it can help us understand capitalist relations under the postdigital era. The third section turns to postdigital temporality to demonstrate the comradery between historical materialism and postdigital concepts. The fourth section returns to Freeman Dyson’s (2007) declaration that the twenty-first century is the century of biology. We look at historical materialism through the biodigital lens and consider the implications of their serendipitous twin birth in the 1800s. The last section is a lob in the air, a demonstration of itself, as we explore apathy toward the truth as a marxist research principle.

2 Base-Superstructure as a Temporal Metaphor

Students are often taught historical materialism through the imagery of base-superstructure. In this chapter, we confront this image and springboard off it to make connections to the postdigital. Today, the reigning conception of historical

materialism is *visualized* as an underground ‘material base’ with an aboveground ‘superstructure’, with the base causally producing the superstructure and, in more generous interpretations, with the superstructure reacting back upon the base. This is a misconception, but it isn’t unforgivable or nonsensical given the overall lack of engagement with Marx’s work and marxist theory overall, which would reveal the strange, outsized role it plays in work on and in historical materialism. It is, moreover, understandable given the overall neglect of the *pedagogy* of Marx’s writing (Ford 2022). We can begin to rectify all this by turning to Marx’s famous articulation of the relationship between the base and superstructure.

In the author’s preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx (1859/1904: 11) summarizes ‘the general conclusion’ of his study of political economy (emphasis added). In these few short pages, Marx presents a sketch of his method that is well-known and worth revisiting in its entirety:

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness. (Marx 1859/1904: 11–12)

Continuing to deliver his conclusion, Marx writes that revolutionary transformations occur because of a conflict between ‘the material forces of production’ and ‘the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations within which they had been at work before’ (Marx 1859/1904: 12). ‘With the change of the economic foundation’ brought about by social revolution, ‘the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed’ (12). The implication, it seems, is that the superstructure (e.g., property relations) changes solely because of changes in the economic base (e.g., whether production is based on enslaved work or waged work). Thus, we encounter the start of the famous formulation of the base and superstructure we inherit from specific readings—deployed by both marxists and our opponents—presenting it as a mechanical dogma or, to be more generous, as an *explanatory* mechanism. In opposition to this formulation, we argue that the base and superstructure is a *metaphor* and *model* for marxists, a way to analyze and approach society and social transformation rather than an easy *explanation*. More accurately, it evidences the fact that the base-superstructure embodies a particular pedagogical decision by Marx, which Engels considers in his responses to Bloch. Marx’s preface, where we encounter the above sketch, introduces a short and popularly written book, so his mention of the model there is more didactic than theoretical.

Nevertheless, in critical educational research, this interpretation is repeated *ad nauseum* (often without any specific quotations from or even references to Marx)

for the benefit of generating critiques of marxism as economistic or deterministic.¹ For one classic example, Henry Giroux (1983: 259) announces his theory of educational resistance by contrasting it with ‘reproduction accounts of schooling’ that ‘have continually patterned themselves after structural-functionalist versions of Marxism which stress that history is made “behind the backs of” the members of society’, thereby diminishing or eliminating ‘the importance of human agency and the notion of resistance’. We may contrast this view with Cox’s (2015) interpretation of historical materialism as the theory which can break through historicism to restore human agency, because to Marx, the people are the only agents who can make the future arrive.

For another example, this time more recent and focused on white supremacy, Clayton Pierce legitimates his work on W. E. B. DuBois and education by affirming ‘that the U.S. education system cannot *simply* be explained through its relation to economic superstructure or how schools operate solely to reproduce economic social relations beneficial to the processes of capitalist accumulation’ (Pierce 2017: 28) (emphasis added). In both cases, Marx and historical materialism are delivered to us as simple economic determinism, a delivery accomplished by superficial or cursory glosses at the primary source material.

The legacy for such short-circuits extend back to Marx and Engels’ own time. In an 1890 letter responding to the German socialist Joseph Bloch’s questions about the model, Engels highlights the *pedagogical* nature of their presentations. Pedagogical, in the sense that the model is presented with the intent of teaching something to others and is thus communicated with an educational ethic. Engels begins: ‘According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life’ (1890b/1977: 75) (emphasis original). He is de-emphasizing the extent to which production guides politics and history while still defending its determinant role. ‘If somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the *only* determining one, he is transforming that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase.’ (75) Still, Engels takes responsibility ‘for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it’ insofar as ‘we had to emphasize the main principle over and against our adversaries, who denied it’ (Engels 1890b/1977: 78). Put differently, they attributed so much emphasis on the economic base because they were responding to those who denied the determination of productive relations altogether. The 1800s was a time of great idealism in philosophy, when authors assumed that ideas (the attitudes of great men) were what drove political change. Many still look at history through this same distorted lens today.

As a pedagogical choice, Marx and Engels’ emphasis on the economic should be seen as an intervention which emanates from historical-materialist research methods in that it was part of a battle in a particular epoch. It was not an absolute

¹Importantly, these false starts that form(ed) the basis of critical educational theory have been expertly dissected and disproven in the recent studies of David I. Backer (2022). Although, because this work focuses on the legacy of Louis Althusser in education, Backer’s method doesn’t entail a return to Marx’s own work.

statement but a timed and particular message – following the ethic of historical materialism itself. This is not unlike Cox’s (2015) resistance to the term ‘postdigital’, which we see as a *strategic* move intervening in a given *conjuncture* rather than a timeless announcement. As the chapter appeared in the first book on postdigital aesthetics, it served to counter those who would uncritically march forward under the banner of the ‘postdigital’. This is an intervention similar to Hugh O. Burnam’s assertion that during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, ‘many [Indigenous] Elders could not, did not know how, or were unwilling, to meet using Zoom when our government structure has always (since time immemorial) met in person’ (Burnam and Brett 2022: 178). Burnam points us to the poem ‘The Pandemic Will Not be Zoom’ which was ‘screamed’ by an unknown scholar ‘into the void’:

The Pandemic will not teach you algebra when old people equal zero
 The Pandemic will not prepare you for jobs that do not exist yet when jobs do not exist ...
 The Pandemic will not be recorded so you can watch back later
 The Pandemic will not be recorded so you can watch back later because the Pandemic will
 not be on Zoom (Costello et al. 2020: 623)

The interventions of these scholars emerge from a historical-materialist approach because they arrive at a specific conjuncture. Their conjecture was defined not just by the pandemic but also by the constellation of colonialism and capitalism that persists to this day. Only in a historical conjecture do their interventions makes sense. At the same time, they are not fleeting or parochial truths, but truths of immense significance and relatability. What is at stake is not whether the Elders’ relationship to Zoom, or the maddened poem, is analog or digital, but *whose interests* are being centered in the current postdigital era. The scholars are making a political and ethical call for our research to be guided by questions of *whose* interests prevail? What effects does how digital technologies are designed, distributed, consumed, and enforced have on society? Historical materialism calls our attention to such questions within postdigital research. For instance, the problem is not the ‘digital’ per se but how ‘through digital media, the images of billionaire settler capitalists [like Jeff Bezos in space during the pandemic] are reconfigured as subjects in which we almost have no choice but to view our realities through’ (Burnam and Brett 2022: 171).

3 From the Metaphor to Action

Back to the letter: Engels infers that Bloch’s questions derive from his study of secondary literature only, and he asks Bloch to read the primary sources, referring him in particular to Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852/1972), perhaps the only other place Marx mentioned the superstructure explicitly (he only alludes to it elsewhere), and in a manner similar to what we saw

above.² We point out that Engels refers Bloch to this work because, in it, Marx uses the base-superstructure metaphor to describe the role of social democracy in the failure of the 1848 Paris revolution and the success of the 1851 coup of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. In other words, Marx wanted to ‘distinguish still more the phrases and fancies of parties from their real organism and their real interests, their conception of themselves from their reality’ (Marx 1852/1972: 47). Despite their revolutionary phrases, social democracy, he writes, ‘is epitomized in the fact that democratic-republican institutions are demanded as a means, not of doing away with two extremes, capital and wage labor, but of weakening the antagonism and transforming it into harmony’ (50). The social-democratic forces didn’t seek to overthrow the existing relations of production but to manage them in a more equitable manner *through* the capitalist superstructure. They didn’t seek to overthrow the base, just the superstructure.

The base-superstructure model doesn’t *explain* but rather helps Marx *present* this phenomenon. Even remaining within Marx’s (1859/1904) preface, the base-superstructure model should prevent any economic interpretation. For one, the base of society—which is also translated as ‘infrastructure’—includes the relations of production and the productive forces. Productive forces name labor-power, instruments or tools used by workers, and the materials workers transform in the production process. The relations of production entail the social organization of production and reproduction, or how the re/production of life is structured. As such, the base doesn’t just consist of the forces of production, but productive relations, relations that are not only economic but social.

Second, the superstructure comprises the political-legal system of the state and consciousness—or ideology—in general, yet the superstructure is also economic insofar as the state and ideology are themselves economic processes and as the relations of production require, for example, the legal system of the state to enforce private property rights. In this instance, it’s crucial to the reproduction of the base. Because the capitalist legal system arises from capitalist relations of production, changes in the legal system might alter the existing relations of production, but they can’t fundamentally overthrow them, for that requires the creation of a new social and economic system.

Yet Marx didn’t resolutely oppose reforms or the pursuit of more equality within capitalism through capitalist institutions. He certainly didn’t in *Capital*, where he ended the chapter detailing the horrific results of industrialization on workers, peasants, and slaves by calling for the oppressed to organize and institute ‘the *modest* Magna Charta of a legally limited working-day’ (1867/1967: 286) (emphasis added). He did resolutely oppose the absorption of the socialist project into capitalist circuits of management, but that did not mean opposing life-saving reforms. Instead, reform and revolution, superstructural and infrastructural changes—already

² ‘Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought, and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding relations.’ (Marx 1852/1972: 47)

intertwined—must be pursued in tandem, but with the ultimate objective of overthrowing the capitalist state.

We currently live in a postdigital era of capitalism. Historical materialism lets us grasp capitalist relations in our age, for it accounts for radical transformations within the capitalist structure. In other words, the new theories that have emerged to capture contemporary capital—from data capitalism and algorithmic capitalism to communicative capitalism and bioinformational capitalism—aren't changes *between* modes of production but changes *within* modes of production. For example, take communicative capitalism, which Jodi Dean defines as 'a new version of capitalism in which communication has become central to capital accumulation' (Dean et al. 2019: 219). Communicative capitalism names a key aspect of contemporary capital that represents a change in both the base and superstructure of society. Communication is key in the production and realization of value (base), as data becomes increasingly valuable and profitable, but it is also key in transforming the social relations of society (superstructure). Communication is not only a source of (surplus-) value but also a way for democratic 'ideals of access, inclusion, discussion, and participation ... to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications, and interconnections of global telecommunications' (Dean 2009: 23). We come to think and believe that participating in online discussions provides a route to more equality and inclusion—and maybe even liberation—when, in fact, they further tie us to capital's demands.

The base and superstructure comingle through the postdigital set-up of capital. It becomes difficult to distinguish between communication as a central feature of new relations of production and new forms of thought (just like it is difficult to distinguish between the analog and the digital under postdigitalism). Historical materialism can capture the union of biology, society, and knowledge represented by the postdigital in the same way it captures changes in 'old and emerging forms of capitalism' (Ford and Jandrić 2021: 2). The flexibility of the base-superstructure model provides an important avenue for describing the role of algorithms, bioinformation, and data in reproducing relations of exploitation and oppression that are both economic and extra-economic.

4 The Lonely Hour of the Economy Never Comes

It is true that in the base-superstructure model, the economy determines in the last instance.³ Engels writes as much in his correspondence with German economist Conrad Schmidt: only 'in the last instance [is] production the decisive factor' (Engels 1890a/1977: 80). With this move, the spatial metaphor of historical materialism is temporalized: not only is the image of a building and its steel infrastructure

³ We follow Raymond Williams in understanding 'to determine' to mean setting limits and pressures on a particular trajectory rather than as fully straightjacketing or molding it (Williams 1977: 84).

invoked, but also the idea of a sequence of events (Ford and Esposito 2022). Althusser picks up this idea and develops it. He allows us to see how the model's pedagogical function 'does not fix its destiny for all time' (1965/2005: 113). He writes: 'Pedagogic systems do change in history. It is time to make the effort to raise pedagogy to the level of circumstances, that is, of historical needs. But we must all be able to see that this pedagogical effort *presupposes* another purely theoretical effort.' (113) Although we remain undecided on Althusser's separation of pedagogy from theory—partly because he never defined pedagogy—we propose that he engaged in the work of pedagogical theory required for our moment. That is how we approach his restatement of the model. He produced a two-part formulation that restates the base-superstructure model with two contradictory components: while it is true that 'the economy is determinant in the last instance' it is also true that 'the lonely hour of the "last instance" never comes' (1965/2005: 113).

The lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes because there is never a time and space where the purely economic even *exists*. The economy never operates alone, and as we have shown, it is always fusing and separating from race, the law, gender, consciousness. More fundamentally, the economic is only a product of our thought. Just like the digital is a line we have drawn around *certain* things in an analogue world, the economy too is a line we have drawn in society. One can't actually 'see' where the economy ends and society begins because one can't *see* the economy or society. The base-superstructure, which is a spatial metaphor or topography, helps us see these invisible entities and social relations.

Because of this, there is a *persistent absence* of the determinant primacy of the material basis within historical materialism. The assertion of the determinant primacy of the material basis could read like a dogma or formula, as a claim about the ubiquity of capitalist social formations across time and space (Agamben 1978/2007: 105). Or it could read in the exact opposite fashion, as a claim about the impossibility of such a determination, which exposes politics and philosophy to a radical and foundational contingency operating on the basis of a 'true historical materialism' that 'is ready at any moment to stop time' (115).

The concept of the postdigital has always resisted any precise temporal placement, and historical materialism accommodates for that. Historical materialism disavows linear, purely chronological time, as that is in large part what dialectics means in a historical context. Writing about postdigital aesthetics, Cox (2015: 160) reminds us that '[i]t is the temporal sense of incompleteness that drives transformative agency' because 'human subjects seek to modify their lived circumstances knowing their experiences to be incomplete'. In other words, time's incompleteness is where human agency exists. For instance, the relationship between capitalism and socialism is not 'a short circuit between otherwise historically clearly separated times' but one of 'feedback loops' that allow historical subjects to choose what elements from the old system they want to take with them, and what they want to abolish (Cox 2015: 160). Loosely, we have suggested that historical materialism and postdigitalism are compatible in the temporal realm.

5 The Biology and Science of Historical Materialism

Thus far we have shown that, like the postdigital, historical materialism can embody a radical temporal openness. We now turn to consider how historical materialism is specifically biodigital in form. This idea must start at Freeman Dyson's (2007) proclamation that the twentieth century was the century of physics and the twenty-first century is the century of biology. Michael Peters builds on this observation by staking out the concept of 'bioinformational capitalism'. The term defines how our current era is defined by capitalist innovations 'that control, change and experiment with the material basis of life' (Peters 2012: 98). This includes artificial intelligence, machine learning, bioengineering, biotechnology etc. Capitalism today is 'obsessed' with 'working people's biologies' as that which can either serve as a block or a generator of surplus value (Pappachen and Ford 2022: 242). Given that the challenges we face in the postdigital era are deeply biological, historical materialism is a surprisingly fitting method.

Historical materialism and evolutionary biology were like sisters separated at birth. At least their mothers thought so: when Marx published *Capital* (1867/1967), he intended to dedicate his book to Charles Darwin who published the *Origin of Species* (1859/2011) only eight years prior. They were contemporaries, and Marx saw a deep similarity between their approaches to the empirical world. This is evidenced in an exchange of amicable letters between the two in 1873 (Fay 1978: 135). Furthermore, in an important footnote in *Capital*, Marx likens his analysis of the changes in manufacturing tools to how Darwin explained the evolution of organs in plants and animals (Marx 1867/1967: 323). He refers to Darwin's work as 'epoch-making' for how it used material evidence to explain the historical development of species (323). He saw himself as doing the same thing, but with the social world.

Engels also adopted a biological methodology, perhaps more explicitly than Marx. He goes so far with the science analogies sometimes that it can read like scientism, like when he compares class antagonism to the repulsion of oxygen and hydrogen molecules (Engels 1878/1978: 708). Nevertheless, we only intend here to take stock of various points of connection between biology and marxism as methods. Another point of connection is the title of Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884/2010), which certainly owes something to Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859/2011). Engels makes all of this explicit during his funeral oration at Marx's graveside in 1883: 'Just as Darwin discovered the law of evolution in organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of evolution in human history' (Fay 1978: 133).

Emersed as we are in the phase of bioinformation, historical materialism likely experiences a return to its own beginnings. Bioinformational capitalism – 'based on a self-organizing and self-replicating code that harnesses both the results of the information and new biology revolutions', is comfortable ground for this old method (Peters 2012: 105). Because of this connection, the biological/biodigital can help us better understand historical materialism. The bio-lens vindicates historical

materialism from accusations of determinism, linear developmentalism, and stageism in two ways.

For one, marxist methods are accused of presenting changes in history as the result of organic, inexorable laws. Political scientist Karl Popper (1945) for instance points to the few moments where Marx uses the phrase ‘inexorable laws of Nature’ to make this accusation (1867/1967: 715). He claimed that marxism was basically ‘scientific fortune telling’ and ‘large-scale historical prophecy’ because it held that certain natural laws governed society (1945: 279). An example of such a law would be that capitalism inevitably runs in devastating boom and bust cycles. While marxists do see this as a law, biology itself teaches us that laws are not inviolable or standardized. No laws or tendencies, whether in the natural sciences or in the judiciary are permanent—they change over time, are interpreted differently, applied differently, modified and augmented in innumerable ways (Ford 2022: 35). One only needs to glance at the history and philosophy of science to know this. Laws (such as the antagonism of the bourgeois and the proletarian) do not close all avenues to change and movement within the system. For example, infighting occurs within each class, and sometimes sectors of both classes unite in strategic alliances.

Second, marxists are accused of retelling history in a stageist fashion. Feudalism to capitalism to socialism to communism: the steps are laid out in a predetermined way. However, in one of his deeper critiques of Hegel, the 1857 ‘Introduction’ from the *Grundrisse*, Marx dismisses the Hegelian temporal rule that ‘the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself’ (Marx 1939/1973: 106). Hegel said that the current stage views the stage before it as a step leading up to itself as if on a ladder. Marx suggests that he viewed the process differently and provided a biological example to make the point. While it is true that ‘human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape’ (105), this doesn’t mean that human anatomy is the teleological outcome of the ape. Louis Althusser (2018/2020: 149), who worked to wrest marxism from such historicism, rightly claims that ‘Marx would say: every result is plainly the result of a becoming, but its becoming does not contain that result *in itself*’ (emphasis original). The result is not predetermined, but the product of struggle and chance. Biodigital concepts such as the genetic evolution of the human species have been used by marxists to gain a deeper understanding of their own method.

6 An Apathetic Method

There is no doubt that Marx and Engels developed, out of necessity, the method of historical materialism to not only ‘reconcile’ with their former Hegelian consciousness but, more importantly, to arm the working-class struggle in its path toward the dictatorship of the proletariat. In this way, historical materialism is precisely a method guided by an explicit desire for a future end goal and, as such, could be interpreted as a method guided by the need for certainty, for truth. This, however, is only one—and, as we argue, one insufficient—way of viewing the matter. In fact,

from another vantage point—one that we hold provides a much more accurate and marxist framing—historical materialism is precisely an *apathetic method*; apathy, which comes to U.S. English by way of the Greek word *apatheia*, which can be transliterated as ‘absent of feeling’.

How could we possibly describe marxism as apathetic, as without feeling? Only by way of perhaps another equally daring move in time, space, and political and intellectual tradition: a move to the pedagogical philosophy of Jean-François Lyotard. In a short article appearing in an early 1975 edition of the French journal, *Critique*, Lyotard (1977/2022: 141) calls for and performs a practice of apathetic theory that is positioned solely against ‘theoretical terror’, a terror that names theoretical frameworks and principles that are guided solely by ‘the desire for truth’. A ‘terror of truth’ dominates most all of scholarly inquiry: the need to deliver a true or false, a yes or no, a certainty or an ignorance.

Lyotard’s short piece begins with a clarion call ‘to introduce into ideological or philosophical discourse the same refinement, the same lightness obtaining in works of painting, music, “experimental” cinema, as well, obviously, as in those of the sciences’ (Lyotard 1977/2022: 141). Lyotard finds a trace of such an apathetic moment in an excurses in which Freud considers whether or not he believes in the truth-status of his hypothesis. The hypothesis in question was about whether drives are repetitive. ‘My answer’, Freud (1922/1955: 59) confesses, ‘would be that I am not convinced myself and that I do not seek to persuade other people to believe in them’. Further, he continues to reject any possible justification as to ‘why the emotional factor of conviction should enter into this question at all’. Just afterwards, however, Freud rephrases his answer like this: ‘Or, more precisely, that I do not know how far I believe in them’ (59). Belief in his truthfulness is framed as an emotional commitment: the opposite of which would be indifference about the truthfulness of his claim.

Lyotard (1977/2022: 143) reads in these pages an eruption of apathy into Freud’s will to construct a theoretical account of all drives, for ‘if all drives are repetitive, then the doctrine of drives must be *monist*... and that is out of the question’ (emphasis original). Monist, in the sense that there would be only one overarching, always-right explanation. Thus, Freud’s reflections represent traces of the absent determinations of drives, or the infinite paths that drives and their doctrine can yet pursue. The theory of the drives is subject to the same repetitive compulsion as that which it names and, as such, it ‘precludes any conviction, for it makes it impossible to please *a cause*, i.e., an established and stable relation between an effect and an instance’ (146) (emphasis original). The ‘terror of causation’, if you will, a fear which reigns in disciplines like Political Science and Economics in the U.S., must be avoided by theory.

As conviction is the belief in the truthfulness of a theory or method, Freud’s wandering remarks demonstrate ‘the absence of determinacy’ and ‘an undecidability of affect, a positive potency of not knowing whether he believes in his theory or not, a potency of affirmation alien to the question of belief’ (Lyotard 1977/2022: 146). Only now, it seems, can we make sense of Freud’s decision to close *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with a poetic quote: ‘What we cannot reach flying we must

reach limping' (Freud 1922/1955: 64). The difference between flying and limping turns precisely on conviction: 'the limper does not know *whether he believes* in space and time, whereas the flyer does: he is *convinced*', he must be convinced (Lyotard 1977/2022: 147) (emphasis original). Freud's theory of drives requires a shift from flying to limping, from conviction to apathy.

This apathy is not a political disinterestedness in general. Instead, as Kiff Bamford (2022: 211) tells us, apathy is 'the indifference to those affects of conviction operating within theory that enable a binary response of true or false, yes or no'. Apathetic theory 'allows lines of thought to be followed regardless of the need and pressures to prove according to usual conventions, through demonstrable evidential claims' and is rather 'based on an affective instinctual "hunch" which, because it is uncertain in its very method, cannot subscribe to accepted conventions of thinking' (207). Apathetic theory is antagonistic to the terrorism of theory (or truth, or causation) not because it annihilates theories aspiring toward 'truth' but because it produces alternative options such as 'wandering' and limping (Lyotard 1977/2022: 149).

Is the absent determination of the economic we find in Marx's theoretical work and the pedagogical role historical materialism plays in this work not precisely such a kind of apathetic endeavor? Marx reaches a conclusion only to take it up in new directions, to see where it takes him. Any pretense toward constructing *the* theory of capital or of the class struggle is, out of principle, rejected from the very start by Marx. The pedagogy of historical materialism is one that limps over and through its object of inquiry in order to produce knowledge and thought.

7 Conclusion

In a neglected sentence before the sketch of his 'general conclusion',⁴ Marx says that his conclusion was nothing more than a new beginning that 'once reached, continued to serve as the leading thread in my studies' (Marx 1859/1904: 11). We are returned back to a *start* after *almost* reaching a conclusion. That Marx's conclusions are another starting point demonstrates a particular historical-materialist pedagogy that neither disavows politics nor is determined solely by the class struggle. It also demonstrates a biological and reproductive ethic where the end of a life is nothing but the beginning of a new one. All decay gives life, whether the rotting carcass enriches the forest soil, or new babies are born to fill the absence of the passing elderly.

This conclusion hopes, similarly, to return the reader to a new beginning. We began this chapter with the wager that historical materialism and postdigital research could be fellow travelers, companions even. Over the course of the pages, the two have overlapped, helped each other out, become one, and then diverged, drifted

⁴Referring to the 'general conclusion' summarized by Marx in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859/1904: 11–12).

apart, and gone their separate ways. In our historical moment, the working people of the world are suffering acutely, to different degrees, at the hands of the same system. At such a time, we cannot be satisfied with critique alone—we must build theoretical apparatuses that can give us hope for a better world system. We must combine forces, unite disparate theoretical approaches, and build a united research front that can take on the postdigital challenges in front of us. It with this sense of urgency that we offer historical materialism as a postdigital method of philosophy.

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