1 An Equivalence between Two Expressions: Materialist Dialectics and Dialectical Materialism

Our investigation begins with a simple observation, the distinction between adjectives and nouns. For example: in the formulation ‘materialist dialectics’, ‘dialectics’ is a noun, and being ‘materialist’ is its qualification; while in the expression ‘dialectical materialism’, it is materialism which is at stake, a materialism which has the quality of being itself ‘dialectical’. These are, therefore, quite different terms: the first, a specific form of dialectics – to be distinguished from, for example, an ‘idealist dialectics’ – and the second, a specific form of materialism – different from a ‘vulgar’ or ‘reductionist’ materialism. And just as there is nothing which requires there to be any sort of immanent compatibility between expressions, such as the ‘being of a thing’ and the ‘thing-ness of being’, at least outside of the Heideggerian universe, we should also not be so quick to accept the equivalence of the expressions ‘materialist dialectics’ and ‘dialectical materialism’.

But how are we, then, to understand the culmination of Louis Althusser’s *For Marx*, the statement which condenses the very stakes of Marxist philosophy? After arguing for the need to construct, and think, the Marxian dialectics in its own terms, without delegating its theoretical definition to the mere ‘inversion’ of the Hegelian system, Althusser concludes: ‘this Theory is the *materialist dialectic* which is none other than *dialectical materialism*.’ Could we simply accept this strange equivalence between the two expressions? Before we investigate the implications and presuppositions of such a remark, it is important to consider the particular conjuncture which produced it.

Althusser’s main concern in this particular essay – titled ‘On the Materialist Dialectic’ – was to counter the ideological and revisionist consequences that followed from the mere extrinsic and abstract usage of dialectical categories in heterogenous political and theoretical contexts:

---
1 Althusser 2010, p. 168.
The external application of a concept is never equivalent to a theoretical practice. The application changes nothing in the externally derived truth but its name, a re-baptism incapable of producing any real transformation of the truths that receive it. The application of the ‘laws’ of the dialectic to such and such a result of physics, for example, makes not one iota of difference to the structure or development of the theoretical practice of physics; worse, it may turn into an ideological fetter.\(^2\)

In short, it seemed to Althusser that the external application of concepts derived from Marx’s Capital, or Lenin's work, to diverse fields of study and struggle, did not lead to their true transformation, but rather to an inefficacious ‘re-baptism’ of the field in question and an ideologisation of the conceptual framework imported into it – hence the importance of the continuous demarcation between the truly scientific production of knowledge, and ideology’s perpetuation of certain naturalised notions through such constant ‘re-baptisms’. However, hidden behind this concern with the differentiation between ideology and theory proper, there lies an even more fundamental problem: the question of a theory of the materially new. After all, how could there be a theory which helps to produce, and think, real change? Would its very determinate character, being a determinate theory, not get in the way of the proper apprehension of what is truly novel and, therefore, indeterminate from the standpoint of the situation? Would not a theory of the new, precisely because it has a determinate notion of novelty, ultimately and structurally fail to recognise novel, and surprising, determinations brought about by change and revolutionary transformation?

For Althusser, the Hegelian dialectics was not simply a teleological one, but one in which the contradictory and the indeterminate were always already informed by precisely an unchanging transcendental frame. Idealism – and, ultimately, ideology – is nothing but the substitution of the practico-historical work of conceptualisation of a given transformative practice, for a rigid and definitive ‘essentialisation’ of its existing state and reliabilities. The fight against idealism is, then, ultimately, the struggle for the proper theoretical apprehension of what revolutionary practices unforeseeably produce in their proper singular historical conjunctures and fields of investigation – the struggle for the local and material production of the determinate indexes of a theory. Althusser concludes, against the reference to Hegel’s dialectical framework within Marxism, that ‘whether we are dealing with a confrontation with something new in

---

\(^2\) Althusser 2010, p. 170.