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Materialism, Politics, and the History of Philosophy

French, German, and Turkish Materialist Authors in the Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this chapter is to analyse the political uses of the categorization of eighteenth-century French materialism as mechanistic and reductionist. Regardless of the current or outdated character of these materialisms, their rejection and the narratives that endorsed such judgments appear as partly ideological. Using several examples, this chapter will examine how this reductionist image of eighteenth-century French materialism was formed in the nineteenth century. It aims to show that the quarrels about materialism focused at that time on the question of a society's dominant beliefs.

KEYWORDS: materialists of the eighteenth century; French materialism; English materialism; idealism, German; philosophy, Turkish; political science – philosophy; Staël, madame de; Cousin, Victor; Büchner, Ludwig; Beşir Fuad

Materialism, Politics, and the History of Philosophy

French, German, and Turkish Materialist Authors in the
Nineteenth Century

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In contemporary materialist traditions such as Marxism or neo-materialism, reference to pre-nineteenth century philosophers is often limited to a small number of authors: Spinoza, sometimes Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius. It is striking that other traditions, such as eighteenth-century materialism, when the very category of 'materialism' was forged, or late nineteenth-century scientist materialism, which loudly proclaimed this label, are generally put aside or deemed obsolete. The terms of the accusation are well known: these materialisms are, according to many Marxist materialists, too mechanistic, reductionist, insufficiently emancipatory and subversive, and even judged 'ideological' for having justified the capitalist order that was being established at the time. But if we want to understand the philosophical and political reasons for these judgments, it is necessary to take the 'materialist' categorization of these doctrines seriously, not to judge them as more or less materialist according to their approximation to a current model. My methodology is, in some way, a nominalist one, since my point of departure is not the universal idea of 'materialism' but what has actually been categorized

as such. I will take both a historical and a transnational perspective, briefly analysing some of the alliances of materialism and politics since the eighteenth century in France, Germany — in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Ludwig Büchner — and in some Turkish Ottoman authors. This broader view is important so as to not remain stuck in the identification, which has become commonplace, of an eighteenth-century mechanistic and reductionist materialism as a solely European endeavour. More specifically, my aim is to analyse the political uses of the categorization of materialism as mechanistic and reductionist. I would like to show how, regardless of the current or outdated character of these materialisms, their rejection has often also had an ideological character, as has the narratives that have endorsed these judgments of reductionism and mechanism. To understand how this can be the case, one should bear in mind that materialism is not only about ontological questions relating to the relationship between matter and spirit, but it has also been radically critical of religion, which has led, among other things, to Marx's and Engels' critique of ideology as the dominant form of thought. This point also concerns the teaching of philosophy: materialism has been significantly marginalized in universities and in the history of philosophy until the middle of the nineteenth century at least, and arguably later as well. In return, materialist authors have not spared universities and the specific history of philosophy that they teach from a major critique regarding the separation of this teaching from reality. Thus, the erasure of certain materialist traditions is a question that concerns both politics and the history of philosophy. Following authors such as Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey,¹ one may wonder to what extent it is possible to adopt a materialist perspective while being a scholar of the history of philosophy, i.e. studying ancient texts, which cannot be transposed as such to the present day — which does not mean that materialism was not somehow efficacious in this time, or that the texts are no longer relevant for us. My own approach is, therefore, to critique the ideology that permeates the practices of the history of philosophy. This is, incidentally, a materialist approach.

1 Cf. Pierre Macherey, *Histoires de dinosaure: Faire de la philosophie (1965–1997)* (Paris: PUF, 1999).

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH MATERIALISM AND THE
CRITIQUE OF ORTHODOXY

The Connection between Ontology and Politics

'Materialism', a term which in French dates back to the early eighteenth century in a text Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz wrote against Pierre Bayle from 1702,² was then applied retrospectively to a number of doctrines that emerged since Democritus and Epicurus. In the eighteenth century, the polemical and politically subversive meaning of the term 'materialism' could hardly be separated from its ontological meaning.³ In France, materialism only came out of hiding, and still only partially, in Julien Offray de La Mettrie's books *L'Histoire naturelle de l'âme* (1745) and *L'Homme-machine* (1747).⁴ The association of 'materialism' with 'fatalism' and 'atheism', for example in the thought of Paul Thiry, baron d'Holbach, was at least as subversive as monism.⁵ This is not the place to discuss the association, which was made as early as the eighteenth century, between Spinozism and materialism, or the distinctions often made by some materialist authors between Spinoza and their own doctrines. Rather, I would like to point out that the definition of eighteenth-century materialism in terms of mechanism, reductionism,⁶ and utilitarianism does not do justice to the complexity

2 According to the etymological dictionary, it is necessary to go back in French to Leibniz's text of 1702 *Réplique aux réflexions de Bayle* to find the word 'matérialisme', which was then translated into English. The adjective 'materialist/matérialiste' is a little older and appeared in English around 1660 (in Ralph Cudworth, Henry More and Robert Boyle), in French in 1698 (in Bonaventure de Fourcroy) and in 1700 in the first French translation of John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by Coste. Cf. <<http://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/matérialisme>> and <<https://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/matérialiste>> [accessed 1 November 2020].

3 Cf. Franck Salaün, *L'Affreuse Doctrine: Matérialisme et crise des mœurs au temps de Diderot* (Paris: Kimé, 2014); the classic work of Daniel Mornet, *Les Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1933) should be mentioned as well.

4 Jean-Claude Bourdin, *Hegel et les matérialistes français du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1992), p. 23.

5 This term was used only from the end of the nineteenth century, based on the work of Ernst Haeckel.

6 Even in the work of Julien Offray de La Mettrie, the very complex mechanism cannot be reduced to the model of shocks and to one simple explanation. Cf. La Mettrie, *L'Homme-machine* (Paris: Fayard, 2000 [1747]), p. 49, translated in *The Monist*, 3.2 (April 1913), p. 300: 'Man is so complicated a machine that it is impossible to get a clear idea of the machine beforehand, and hence impossible to define it. For this reason, all the investigations have been vain, which the greatest philosophers have made *a priori*, that is to say, in so far as they use, as it were, the wings of the spirit.'

of materialist texts from the eighteenth century. In these texts the living character,⁷ not the inert character,⁸ of matter⁹ is often discussed; far from referring only to Newtonian physics,¹⁰ these texts also use the model of chemistry and the natural sciences to oppose any kind of teleology in living beings. While d'Holbach did write a *Système de la Nature*, the materialisms of this time are far from always being in a systematic, even dogmatic form. For example, Denis Diderot's conjecture that matter could be endowed with sensibility is sometimes presented using a literary model, notably in the form of fiction and dream, and not that of a first principle from which everything else could be deduced.¹¹ According to many commentators, Diderot's ontology also has a plural character, which precisely derived from the plurality of possible approaches to matter using different sciences.¹²

Thus it is only *a posteriori* or by trying to disentangle the soul from the organs of the body, so to speak, that one can reach the highest probability concerning man's own nature, even though one cannot discover with certainty what his nature is.'

- 7 Cf. Denis Diderot, Letter to Sophie Volland, 15 October 1759, in *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, 20 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1876), xviii, pp. 408–09. This is the famous letter where Diderot dreams that his ashes will mingle with those of his lover, suggesting they might still have 'a remnant of warmth and life'.
- 8 Cf. Paul Thiry, baron d'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, 2 vols (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 1, p. 20: 'If they [natural philosophers] had viewed Nature uninfluenced by prejudice, they must have been long since convinced, that matter acts by its own peculiar energy, and needs not any exterior impulse to set it in motion.'
- 9 Cf. Claude A. Helvétius, *De L'Esprit; or, Essays on the Mind, and its Several Faculties* (London: Albion, 1810), p. 27: 'all that remained was to know [...] whether the discovery of a power, such for instance as attraction, might not give rise to a conjecture that bodies still had some properties hitherto unknown, such as that of sensation, which though evident only in the organized members of animals, might yet be common to all individuals.'
- 10 Cf. Jean-Claude Bourdin, *Les Matérialistes au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Payot, 1996), p. 31. On the contrary, Mario Bunge could argue that Kant understood Newtonian physics as saying that matter was inert. Cf. Mario Bunge, *Scientific Materialism*, Episteme, 9 (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1981), p. 4: 'Kant, who could not read Newton's equations for lack of mathematical knowledge, misunderstood Newtonian physics as asserting that whatever moves does so under the action of some force, be it attractive or repulsive. And Voltaire, who did so much for the popularization of Newtonian physics in his Cartesien country, was struck by the pervasiveness of gravitation but could not understand it adequately because he, too, was unable to read Newton's equations of motion. So neither Voltaire nor Kant realized that the inertia of bodies and light refutes the belief that matter is inert, i.e. incapable of moving by itself.'
- 11 Cf. Jean-Claude Bourdin, *Diderot et le matérialisme* (Paris: PUF, 1998), pp. 75 and 79; Jean-Louis Labussière, 'Diderot métaphysicien. Prédication, participation et existence', in *Lumières, matérialisme et morale: Autour de Diderot*, ed. by Colas Duflou (Paris: Editions de la Sorbonne, 2016), pp. 21–72 (p. 70).
- 12 Cf. François Pépin, 'Le Matérialisme pluriel de Diderot', in *Lumières*, ed. by Duflou, pp. 73–95 (pp. 85 and 94).

However, this ontology is connected to a radical critique of spiritual orthodoxy. This connection is not only a contingent historical fact in the history of ideas that could be explained by the censorship of that time, but has a philosophical basis. In eighteenth-century France, materialism was both a dangerous theory to defend publicly (and therefore marginalized by the official authorities) and a theme that occupied the public space since at least 1751. We must add, however, that this polemical dimension is present in the texts themselves, and their radical critique of spiritual orthodoxy is what makes these theories immediately political. As Bertrand Binoche has underlined, they are political not in the sense that their authors would have held a revolutionary or even reformist political position, or acted in such a way, but in the sense that their materialist critique immediately placed them in a combative and destructive position both in the Republic of Letters and in society.¹³ The ontological thesis of materialism concerning the relationship between body and mind can be said to be particularly important at that time precisely because of its subversive charge against religion and the immortality of the soul, and because it was associated with atheism and held a controversial position on the question of free will. The power to overturn dogmas — upon which a state's false spiritual social harmony is based — is an integral part of these materialisms.

This first detour through the history of materialism allows us to reaffirm something that is perhaps self-evident: the polemical dimension of materialism is an integral part of it. Certainly, all philosophical systems are engaged in theoretical conflicts; as early as the eighteenth century, even before Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the incessant 'struggles' between systems became a philosophical problem. But materialism is distinctive because it not only presents itself as a generator of conflict in the philosophical field, but is also at risk of spreading this conflict into the political and social fields, as Kant himself asserted:

Through criticism alone can we sever the very root of *materialism, fatalism, atheism, of freethinking unbelief, of enthusiasm* and

13 Bertrand Binoche, *'Ecrasez l'Infâme!' . Philosophe à l'âge des Lumières* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2018), p. 23.

superstition, which can become generally injurious, and finally also of *idealism* and *skepticism*, which are more dangerous to the schools and can hardly be transmitted to the public.¹⁴

The reason why the ontological theses of materialism concerning the relationship between body and mind, and between extension and thought, are so important is that they imply atheism and the denial of free will, which in turn calls into question the foundations of (spiritual) harmony in European states.

The Practical Effects Attributed to 'Materialism' after the French Revolution

Concerning the attribution of political subversion and atheism to materialism, the French Revolution and the repercussions it had throughout the nineteenth century radicalized this polemical perspective on materialism and determined how it is still approached today. As early as 1789, a thesis emerged that would go on to become a commonplace, according to which the writings of eighteenth-century philosophers had provoked the French Revolution.¹⁵ This revolution was, according to many contemporaries, unparalleled since it was an example of the application and realization of philosophical principles. The authors mostly targeted here, Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were certainly not explicit materialists,¹⁶ nor were they atheists; yet, quite quickly, and particularly after the Terror, an argumentative strategy emerged which consisted in making 'materialism' the quintessence of French philosophy in the eighteenth century. This was the means whereby authors could then make these 'materialist' doctrines responsible for the wrong-doings of the French Revolution, and even later for the Empire's.

14 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Bxxxiv, p. 119.

15 One of the first to evoke the responsibility of 'philosophism' was Abbé Barruel, as early as the summer of 1789, in *Le Patriote véridique* (The True Patriot); he would later become a follower of the theory of the 'conspiracy of the philosophers' that provoked the French Revolution.

16 Although Rousseau's position on materialism may have been judged ambiguous, he at least affirms his willingness to refute it. Cf. Franck Salaün, 'Les Larmes de Wolmar. Rousseau et le problème du matérialisme', in *Rousseau et la philosophie*, ed. by Jean Salem and André Charrak (Paris: Editions de la Sorbonne, 2004), pp. 71–86.

This is not an anecdotal fact that is only of interest for the history of ideas, but a vision that has influenced the image we still have today of French materialist philosophies in the eighteenth century. It consists of applying the label 'materialist' to authors who have sometimes not claimed this term for themselves systematically, as well as in diluting their theses into a form of mechanism and reductionism, as well as fatalism and atheism. Moreover, it consists in judging the entire French 'materialist' philosophy of the eighteenth century through the light of its supposed revolutionary consequences (and failures).

This criticism is not only to be found among some counter-revolutionary or reactionary authors. For instance, during the first Republic Germaine de Staël wrote a moderate criticism of the philosophers of the Enlightenment, praising their combativeness but deploring their irreligion. However, in that time she nevertheless established (this is around 1796–1800) a continuity between certain eighteenth-century doctrines and the one she believed would be appropriate for the Republic in France.¹⁷ But things changed with Napoleon Bonaparte's founding of the Empire: Staël attributed the submission of the French to despotism, to a selfish, utilitarian state of mind, the roots of which she found in the eighteenth century. Under the term 'materialism', she combined ontological theses on the nature of substance, epistemological empiricism, and a moral approach based on self-interest and the satisfaction of needs. According to Staël, this materialism had its roots in English philosophy, particularly John Locke, but it had only showed its full destructive effects in the institutional and intellectual context specific to France.¹⁸ She wrote her book *On Germany* partly because she saw in German 'idealism' a spiritual remedy to this Anglo-French 'materialism'. Idealism could provide the courage needed to sacrifice oneself to justice, while materialism encouraged careerism, petty calculations of interest, and submission to force.¹⁹ The current, non-philosophical use of the terms 'materialism', 'materialist', and 'materialistic' is certainly still affected by this association, according to which theoretical 'materialism' is linked to a 'materialistic' attitude.

17 Cf. Germaine de Staël, *De la littérature* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1991), p. 287.

18 Cf. Germaine de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, 2 vols (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968), II, p. 110.

19 Cf. Bertrand Binoche, 'La Faute à Helvétius ou le matérialisme après-coup', in *Lumières*, ed. by Duflo, pp. 173–84 (p. 179).

THE DANGERS OF MATERIALISM AND THE PLACE GIVEN TO IT IN
THE HISTORIES OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Marginalization of Materialism by Victor Cousin

The reading of eighteenth-century materialism which Staël constructed along with other theorists spread widely in the nineteenth century and still influences our vision of how eighteenth-century materialism inspired the French Revolution, with its various achievements and limitations. The writing of the history of philosophy, in particular, played a crucial role in this marginalization.

For example, such a reading was conveyed by Victor Cousin in the French university culture in the nineteenth century. Cousin (1792–1867), who had a great influence on the teaching of philosophy in France in the first half of the nineteenth century, gave a major role to the history of philosophy. After Joseph Marie Degérando, who was the author of the first modern history of philosophy in French in 1804, he encouraged a reading of the history of philosophy which aimed to refute materialism and, in general, any philosophy which would claim to have revolutionary consequences.²⁰ As Pierre F. Daled noted, Cousin undermined the importance of materialist authors, practically silenced the names of d'Holbach and La Mettrie, or made Claude-Adrien Helvétius a disciple and successor of Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, which is historically and philosophically untrue.²¹ Cousin made 'materialism' a subcategory of 'sensualism', that is, a doctrine according to which all ideas come to us from the senses. He believed that this doctrine dominated the eighteenth century, first in England and then

20 Cf. Victor Cousin, *Manuel de l'histoire de la philosophie. Traduit de l'allemand de Tennemann* (Paris: Sautélet, 1829), preface, pp. v–vi: The history of philosophy is a way of exposing the 'terrible consequences' of Condillac's sensualism and of Locke's philosophy, which at the end would lead to 'Holbach and La Métrie [*sic*] and all the saturnals of materialism and atheism'.

21 Cf. Pierre-Frédéric Daled, *Le Matérialisme occulté et la genèse du 'sensualisme'. Ecrire l'histoire de la philosophie en France* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), p. 237. See also the founding work of Olivier Bloch, 'Sur l'image du matérialisme français du xviii^e siècle dans l'historiographie philosophique du xix^e siècle: Autour de Victor Cousin', in *Images au xix^e siècle du matérialisme du xviii^e siècle*, ed. by Olivier Bloch (Paris: Desclée, 1979), pp. 39–54.

in France through Locke's reception in that country.²² However, to make materialism a subcategory of sensualism is to think of it through an epistemological criterion rather than a practical one. Ultimately, Cousin presented sensualism as a timeless trend of the human mind and one of the four doctrines (beside 'dogmatism' divided between 'idealism' and 'realism', 'scepticism' and 'mysticism') that regularly appeared in the history of philosophy.²³ Cousin's goal, which we can date to around 1829, was then to present his own doctrine as a 'middle ground', both philosophically and politically, between Republicans and Catholics, and between the French philosophy of the eighteenth century and German metaphysics. His strategy consisted in placing his philosophy on the seemingly depoliticized ground of the history of philosophy, something which would in fact lay the foundations for a new spiritual harmony that would destroy the danger represented by materialism (and, on the other side, by ultra-conservative Catholics). Finally, we can see that this discrediting of the eighteenth-century 'materialists' lives on in today's academic institutions, in a way, without any explicit awareness of its political origins, which in the French case emerged, as we have seen, in the post-revolutionary context.²⁴

The Revival of a Certain Image of Eighteenth-Century French Materialism by Marx and Engels

As paradoxical as it may seem, it appears that the authors of the *Vormärz*, some of whom emigrated to France — including the young Marx and Engels, but also, for example, Heinrich Heine — were not entirely detached from these patterns of interpretation of eighteenth-century materialism. A recurrent question in the materialist texts of the nineteenth century is to know which relationship — whether of continuity or rupture — must be established between eighteenth-century

22 Of course, the importance to materialism of English authors such as David Hartley and Joseph Priestley cannot be denied. However, retrospectively, in the nineteenth century, the rise of materialism in France in the eighteenth century was linked to the reception of Locke's work, rather than that of other authors.

23 Cf. Victor Cousin, *Cours de l'histoire de la philosophie. Histoire de la philosophie du XVIII^e siècle*, 2 vols (Paris: Pichon et Didier, 1829), I, p. 178.

24 Cf. *Une arme philosophique. L'éclectisme de Victor Cousin*, ed. by Delphine Antoine-Mahut and Daniel Whistler (Paris: Éditions des Archives contemporaines, 2019).

materialism and the theory that would be appropriate for a nineteenth-century revolution. For example, Heine, in his book *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, which was written in response to Staël's book on the same topic and with the same title in French (*De l'Allemagne*), states that Spinoza's pantheism should inspire the revolution in Germany, unlike the 'materialism' which was the doctrine of the revolution in France, which could not suit Germany.²⁵ In Heine's work, materialism was not only defined by atheism (in contrast to Spinoza's pantheism), but by a principle of frugality that Heine considered politically insufficient and unsatisfying.²⁶

In *The Holy Family*, on the contrary, Marx and Engels acknowledged the contributions of eighteenth-century French materialism. Against Bruno Bauer, Marx asserted the eighteenth-century source of materialism (inaugurated by Bayle) rather than the Spinozist source of nineteenth-century materialism. According to *The Holy Family*, this eighteenth-century materialism drew upon Cartesian mechanistic physics and Hobbesian nominalism. As with Staël (whose value judgements are, however, reversed in the work of Marx and Engels), seventeenth-century metaphysics (restored by German idealism) is opposed to the subversive materialism of the eighteenth century. Marx and Engels recognized the superiority of eighteenth-century moral theories based on the particular interest of individuals over those theories which were based on an abstract general political interest. However, Olivier Bloch has shown that the categories included in this text by Marx and Engels come from the history of Charles Renouvier's spiritualist philosophy, parts of which they copied.²⁷ Admittedly, invoking paradoxical sources is not enough to criticize a text or deem it inconsistent, but it should be said that the positions proposed by Marx and Engels in the *Holy Family* were quickly overtaken by *The*

25 Cf. Heinrich Heine, *De l'Allemagne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998 [1855]), pp. 81 and 83.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 93, translated in *The London and Paris Observer*, 12 (Paris: Galignani, 1836), p. 84: 'We want neither *sans-culottes*, nor frugal citizens, nor parsimonious presidents; we desire to found a democracy of terrestrial gods, all equals in happiness and holiness. You ask simple raiment, austere manners, and cheap pleasures — we, on the contrary, wish for nectar and ambrosia, mantles of purple, the voluptuousness of perfumes, the dancing of nymphs, music and comedies.'

27 Olivier Bloch, 'Marx, Renouvier et l'histoire du matérialisme', *La Pensée*, 191 (February 1977), pp. 3–42.

German Ideology, where they claimed the character of French materialism in the eighteenth century was insufficient. La Mettrie and Cabanis, for example, were now seen as shifting to the side of ‘ideology’, but in the new sense of a doctrine that forgets the material anchoring of ideas and the relationships of social domination.²⁸ Marx and Engels considered the materialist doctrines of the eighteenth century insufficiently transformative. However, in *The Holy Family*, they saw Helvétius as a ‘materialist’ because of the weight he gave to external circumstances in education.²⁹ Later Marx judged such a position to be insufficient in the third thesis on Feuerbach, written shortly before *The German Ideology*.³⁰

To interpret the materialist philosophies of the eighteenth century as ‘ideologies’ is certainly profoundly innovative. The political effects attributed to these doctrines are thus almost reversed: from being seen as destructive and revolutionary, they now appear to be vectors for the promotion, or even justification, of a new bourgeois order. During the quarrel of materialism that shook Germany from 1847 onwards, Marx and Engels stood aside and criticized authors such as Büchner, Carl Vogt, and others who themselves stood on the side of materialism, but whom Marx criticized harshly in letters³¹ and whom Engels described as ‘vulgar materialists’.³² Engels also somehow associated these thinkers with the materialists of the eighteenth century. What these old and new materialists had in common, according to Marx and Engels, was that they did not measure the importance

28 Cf. Pierre Macherey, *Études de philosophie ‘française’. De Sieyès à Barni* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2016), pp. 87–109.

29 See also Claude A. Helvétius, *Œuvres complètes d’Helvétius*, 3 vols (Paris: Lepelet, 1818), II: *De l’homme*, p. 3, where he claims that the humans are the result of their education, and that improving the science of education is therefore an important means of happiness for the nations.

30 About the materialist use of this thesis, see [Marlon Miguel’s contribution in this volume](#).

31 Cf. Marx to Engels, 14 November 1868, in *MEW* [*Marx-Engels-Werke*, see [abbreviations](#)], xxxii (1974), pp. 202–03 (p. 203) and Marx to Kugelmann, 5 December 1868, in *MECW* [*Marx & Engels Collected Works*, see [abbreviations](#)], xliii (1988), pp. 173–75 (p. 173).

32 Cf. Friedrich Engels, ‘Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy’, in *MECW*, xxvi (1990), pp. 353–98 (p. 369): Engels associates Feuerbach with ‘the shallow, vulgarised form in which the materialism of the eighteenth century continues to exist today in the heads of naturalists and doctors, the form in which it was preached on their tours in the fifties by Büchner, Vogt and Moleschott’.

of social relations — or, in the case of their contemporaries, misapplied Darwinism to social relations — and therefore remained within an ahistoric materialism based solely on the natural sciences. In this way the dichotomy between scientist materialism, based on the natural sciences, and Marx and Engels's materialism, which was later given the general label of 'Marxist materialism' in the twentieth century and was generally coupled with the economic and social sciences, was constituted. However, Engels, who was more interested in these questions than Marx, reinforced the image of a mechanistic eighteenth-century materialism. His article 'Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of German Philosophy' illustrates this view well.³³ Engels did not forget or erase the theses of *The Holy Family*: his book is even closer to this text than any work by Marx himself. For instance, a certain cultural and national affiliation of materialism remains; in his 1880 text *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, and more precisely in the introduction to its first English edition, Engels reproduced some passages from *The Holy Family* and was amused that the English people of his time were still horrified by the thesis that modern materialism had its roots in their country. According to Engels, Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke were the founders of English materialism and the ancestors of the eighteenth-century French materialists.³⁴

33 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 370: 'The materialism of the last century was predominantly mechanical, because at that time, of all natural sciences, only mechanics, and indeed only the mechanics of solid bodies — celestial and terrestrial — in short, the mechanics of gravity, had come to any certain conclusion. Chemistry at that time existed only in its infantile, phlogistic form. Biology still lay in swaddling clothes; plant and animal organisms had been only crudely examined and were explained as the result of purely mechanical causes. What the animal was to Descartes, man was to the materialists of the eighteenth century — a machine. This application exclusively of the standards of mechanics to processes of a chemical and organic nature — in which processes the laws of mechanics are, indeed, also valid, but are pushed into the backgrounds by other, higher laws — constitutes one specific but at that time inevitable limitation of classical French materialism. | The other specific limitation of this materialism lay in its inability to comprehend the world as a process, as matter undergoing uninterrupted historical development. This accorded with the state of the natural science of that time, and with the metaphysical, that is, anti-dialectical manner of philosophising connected with it. Nature, so much was known, was in eternal motion. But according to the ideas, this motion turned just as eternally in a circle and therefore never moved from the spot; it produced the same results over and over again.'

34 Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1892), p. xiii.

My aim here is not to dwell on the current understanding of eighteenth-century materialism, but to stress that under different modalities, defining a theory that leads to transformative practice has implied a reconstruction, sometimes partial and lapidary, of the history of materialism. It seems that in this reconstruction the image of eighteenth-century materialism has become fixed, even in Marx and Engels, into categories inherited from a polemical and post-revolutionary interpretation of the subject. A certain number of commonplaces have therefore emerged about it and been expanded beyond the original context that gave rise to them. The history of philosophy has been one of the main instruments of this marginalization, even in authors such as Marx and Engels, who were most critical of the classical history of philosophy.

This insight leads me to deepen, in the following section, the problem of the relationship between the history of philosophy and the materialism of the nineteenth century, and to sketch how materialism has both criticized and used the history of philosophy. If this history has been one of the places where a certain ideological or dogmatic reading of eighteenth-century materialism has imposed itself, leading many materialist authors to criticize the history of philosophy for being too idealist and orthodox, it has nevertheless also been taken up in a view that claimed to be a materialist one.

CRITICISM AND MATERIALIST USES OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

The Critique of the Academic History of Philosophy by Marx, Engels, and Büchner

Regarding the relationship between the writing of a history of philosophy and materialism, I can only give a concrete and single answer, which cannot claim to be universal. The fact that Marx and Engels took up certain categories of the French debate does not mean that they were not radically critical of a certain practice in the history of philosophy, notably in *The German Ideology*. Therefore, they considered a history of philosophy that would claim complete autonomy, or would make ideas the driving forces of any history and overestimate the importance of philosophical conflicts in history, to be insufficient. This

is, in a way, what Althusser later affirmed by writing that ‘the history of philosophy, in the strict sense, *does not exist*’.³⁵ According to Marx and Engels, one cannot expect the outcome of a philosophical conflict to lead to any real emancipatory effect, since philosophical criticism, which focuses on purely ideal philosophical struggles, blinds itself to the conflicts of civil society. Any criticism of the history of philosophy cannot therefore be separated from the criticism of an ‘idealist’ philosophy of history, which is itself a prisoner, in the Hegelian sense, of its restoration of the religion it claims to override. What is left, in Marxist terms, is the overcoming of a philosophical history of philosophy in favour of the ‘materialist conception of history’ and then the ‘critique of political economy’.

I would like to note, however, that criticism of the ‘pure’ history of philosophy is also found among the authors that Marx and Engels classify as reductionist, ‘vulgar’ materialists. Büchner, for example, overcame the ‘pure’ philosophy of history, even if he did so in a way that Marx and especially Engels contested. In *Kraft und Stoff* (Force and Matter), Büchner criticized the historical study of materialism, sensualism, and determinism the thinkers of the *Schulphilosophie*.³⁶ In his opinion, a kind of ‘thorough’ materialism and good methodology imply, in their own way, the necessity of departing from the history of academic philosophy. Like some eighteenth-century materialists, Büchner aimed to conquer the public space outside of universities rather than the academic institution itself, as well as to subvert orthodoxy.³⁷ Certainly, the criticism of *Kraft und Stoff* that Marx and Engels noted, which concerned its justification of the organization of the modern world, cannot be denied. In particular, it is evident that Büchner, using a model inspired by Feuerbach, thought that humans had separated themselves from religion in their practices, and had become atheists by enjoying all kinds of material comfort, which is an evolution he praises, even if he remarks how contradictory most of his contemporaries still are. He thought that their practice contradicted

35 Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx*, intro. by Étienne Balibar (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), note 48, p. 80.

36 Ludwig Büchner, *Kraft und Stoff. Empirisch-naturphilosophische Studien* (Frankfurt a.M.: Meidinger Sohn, 1855), p. 13.

37 *Ibid.*

the beliefs they upheld: in spite of claiming to be Christians, they were actually atheists.³⁸ In my opinion, it is clear that he believed that the good materialist also tends to be materialistic. But in arguing for such things, Büchner still maintained a certain criticism of common beliefs. In saying this, I am not denying the ruptures between the different forms of materialism, but rather examining at which levels the materialist criticisms of spiritual orthodoxy are situated.

The following three levels of criticism should not be confused: First, materialism contributes to criticizing religious harmony or even, more generally, the dogmas that prevail in society. This criticism, as it is outlined by Marx and Engels, loses the central character it had among eighteenth-century materialists, as well as in Feuerbach and among some representatives of the quarrel of materialism. Second, materialist criticism targets certain philosophical systems that support common social and religious beliefs; it is subversively positioned in philosophical conflicts, and often holds a marginal position in relation to academic philosophy, while seeking to engage with other areas of the public sphere. This can be seen in the work of Staël and Cousin, but also in the young Marx and in later texts from Engels. Third, materialist criticism develops, particularly in Marx and Engels, as a critique of philosophical conflicts in terms of viewing them as a new form of orthodoxy or ideology hiding other more significant types of conflicts.

Does this mean that a thorough materialist position must abandon the field of pure philosophy, and *a fortiori* its history, to open itself up to other sciences — whether to the natural sciences or the social sciences? The natural sciences would have the privilege of grasping the ontological foundation on which philosophical materialism is based; and the social sciences would have the privilege of directly addressing social conflicts that are of more direct importance to practice. However, I would like to conclude by showing, through a single historical example, how materialism has viewed both the history of philosophy and materialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from a non-European lens, namely a Turkish-Ottoman one.

38 Ibid., p. 27. Büchner wrote that 'No one crucifies himself anymore; no one seeks to be deprived instead of enjoying/benefiting [*geniessen*]. But each one hastens and hunts with the best forces of his life for the material goods and possessions of the earth, for the joys and pleasures which the material, refined and refined a thousand times over, offers him' (my translation).

The Possible Use of the History of Philosophy in a Materialist Project: The Case of Beşir Fuad

The French philosophy of the eighteenth century, as well as French and German materialism, was received in the Turkish-Ottoman intellectual arena from 1859 on, when Münif Paşa published translations of Fénelon, Fontenelle, and Voltaire. The study of Turkish texts makes it possible to show the subversive charge that many stories of philosophy retain from a 'materialist' point of view. At the end of the nineteenth century, Turkish materialists were not Marxists, due to the relative absence of Marx's and even Hegel's texts in the Turkish speaking world at the time. While Beşir Fuad (1852–1887) associated Büchner with Voltaire, the Encyclopédistes, and La Mettrie in the same scientific programme,³⁹ Baha Tevfik (1884–1914), a high school teacher and publisher, associated Büchner with Haeckel and even Nietzsche in his materialist project. Abdullah Cevdet (1869–1932), to give one last example, discovered Büchner during his medical studies, translated numerous works, went back to Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis to define his own materialism, before finally claiming his intellectual lineage from Gustave Le Bon. Whether it is consistent or logical is of little interest here. What could be considered here as a doctrinal confusion — and will sometimes be criticized as such by later Turkish philosophers, and particularly some Turkish Marxists — is interesting through the very categorization it produces. One hypothesis to be tested would be asking whether the histories of philosophy, which are certainly not only received by 'materialist' authors in the Turkish-Ottoman intellectual sphere,⁴⁰ have the advantage of offering a philosophical space that is not subordinate to religious orthodoxy. The study of the Turkish texts makes it possible to understand that the autonomization of philosophy and its history need not only be thought of, as Marx and Marxists have done, as an abstraction of philosophy to be criticized in relation to its historical roots, but can instead also be seen as an opportunity given to philosophy to distinguish itself, in its history, from the spiritual realm defined as religious. The materialist philosophers of the eighteenth

39 Cf. Beşir Fuad, *Şiir ve hakikat* (Istanbul: I.k.y., 1999), p. 493.

40 Cf. Ahmed Midhat (1844–1912), who held more conservative positions, translated for instance Alfred Fouillée's history of philosophy which had been translated in a summarized version by Baha Tevfik before.

century may have had a relevance for such a project that cannot be summarized as a desire for Westernization or as a simple promotion of a mechanistic or reductionist philosophy — and even less an alienation of identity.

To illustrate this idea, I will briefly focus on Beşir Fuad (1852–1887). He became famous for his critical monograph *Victor Hugo*, published in 1885, in which he criticized literary Romanticism.⁴¹ After his suicide in 1887,⁴² many of his writings were collected under the title *Şiir ve Hakikat (Poetry and Reality)*. He was neither a scientist nor a philosopher, but rather a translator and mediator who made many French, English, and German theories accessible in Turkish. The concern for the popularization and dissemination of knowledge was essential to his work. For example, he translated popular and didactic works on physiology, such as Emil Otto's German grammar and Jean Macé's *Histoire d'une bouchée de pain*, an educational work, in whose preface Beşir Fuad insisted on the need to have books that everyone can understand.⁴³ Although he preferred the theses of La Mettrie, he prioritized Voltaire and the Encyclopaedists because of their efforts to popularize science: this didactic dimension was constitutive of his materialism. His first imperative was to enable the acclimatization and appropriation of these theories in the Ottoman Empire.

From an epistemological point of view, Beşir Fuad can be placed with Comte and Émile Littré since he positioned himself as an opponent to all metaphysics and any search for final causes or origins. But he also insisted on the combative dimension of science and the gallery of 'heroes' who fought on the side of scientific truth against the Church. We are certainly dealing here with a commonplace idea, one which is partly inherited from the eighteenth century, but Beşir Fuad gave an original interpretation of it which he hoped would be adapted to

41 He was educated as a member of the Ottoman elite. First an officer, he began, in the last three years of his life, prolific activity as a writer, journalist, and translator in fields ranging from physiology to literary theory.

42 Beşir Fuad's suicide is a very important aspect in the reception of his work and reinforced his image as a 'materialist', as he held, until he lost consciousness, notes that were meant to be objective about the sensations he felt after taking drugs and cutting his veins.

43 Cf. Orhan Okay, *Beşir Fuad İlk türk pozitivistisi ve natüralisti* (Istanbul: Dergah yayinlari, 2008 [1969]), p. 99.

the reality of Turkish-Ottoman society of its time. Thus, his 'heroes' of modern Europe who fought against the priests are first of all located in an original history of the Enlightenment which is not reduced to a purely European phenomenon: Beşir Fuad sketched a history of philosophy in which the Arabs, heirs of the Greeks, transmitted knowledge and enlightenment to a Europe that the Church had plunged into darkness. Thus, according to his reading, the encounter of Christianity and Islam in medieval Spain was at the origin of the Renaissance in Europe. In a similar way, Beşir Fuad reinterpreted Voltaire's criticism of the Church and Voltaire's strategic use of Islam in the second part of his work, to turn Voltaire into a defender of Islam.⁴⁴ One point where Beşir Fuad's theory would be opposed to Büchner's concerns the Western character of this struggle for truth. Whereas Büchner opposes the calm of the East to the struggle for truth in the West,⁴⁵ and thus makes the history of philosophical and scientific conflicts something strictly European, Beşir Fuad presents a completely different thesis. He portrayed the Church's oppression of science in Europe and the transmission of the Enlightenment to Europe through an encounter with Islam. Here Beşir Fuad's strategy is clear but complex: it is by no means a question of putting his own philosophical position under the authority of Muslim sacred texts and one must also, in practice, take into account the censorship imposed on writers of that time. But he wishes to introduce such doctrines cautiously into an Empire where Islam is the dominant religion. The first Turkish materialists (among whom we could include Baha Tevfik, Büchner's translator) were determined to question a certain orthodoxy but without attacking the dominant religion head on. In this regard, the discursive strategies of eighteenth-century European materialists were interesting to them.

With this in mind, we can see how the historical presentation of philosophy, whether in the form of short historical sketches or biographies, held a twofold interest. On the one hand, it made a real appropriation (and not just a reception) of French and German materialist doctrines possible by blurring at least part of the intellectual boundaries between East and West. It also revealed an openness, in

44 Beşir Fuad, *Voltaire* (Konya: Çizgi Kitabevi, 2011), p. 170.

45 Büchner, *Kraft und Stoff*, p. 269.

these European theories, to the East or Islam. Beşir Fuad did not wish to alienate his Ottoman political identity and knew the difference between the works published by French and German authors and the imperialist policies of France or Germany in his time. On the other hand, Fuad wished to create, through this historical presentation of philosophy, a space where philosophy can, in the spiritual domain, distinguish itself from religion, and destabilize dominant ways of thinking without having to attack them head-on. Although Beşir Fuad appeared to erase the practical stakes of the historical presentations of philosophy in France, this is in fact what allowed him to move forward with caution. If his definition of materialism as a critique of orthodoxy and his concern for popularization placed him in continuity with a tradition inaugurated in the eighteenth century, his way of blurring borders without situating himself in one cosmopolitical universal space also distinguished him from that tradition. He used the history of philosophy to undermine the subversive charge of his materialist theses by blurring the boundaries between 'European' and 'Eastern' philosophy without making them disappear.

I conclude with some general and methodological remarks. It seems to me that materialism does not necessarily have to be opposed to the history of philosophy. Studying materialist doctrines is not enough to immanently establish the possibility of a materialist history of philosophy. Writing a social history of philosophy, its institutions, and its actors' strategies, as Jean-Louis Fabiani has done following Pierre Bourdieu, is certainly a possible way forward. But a materialist perspective does not necessarily require setting aside the study of concepts and arguments. I remain convinced that the materiality of the history of philosophy also lies in its concepts, which are not merely a simple translation of structures of domination, but attempts to address conceptual problems that have arisen in a social and economic context. It also seems to me that one of the historically foundational elements of materialism, namely the criticism of dogmas and a certain ideological orthodoxy, must also be applied through the history of philosophy. With this thought I do not seek to produce a new great teleologically oriented narrative myself; rather, I mean to study a succession of significant moments which are certainly distinct but which can be articulated around the problem of the relationship

between materialism and the history of philosophy. Historical study also seems to be a means of preserving the plurality of the materialisms and materialities in question and of not falling back into a dogmatic materialism that would be unaware of the ideological aspects it has inherited from its history. If one of the challenges of a materialist approach is to blur the boundaries of philosophy, of what lives in it but is also external to it, then the history of philosophy has its part of the work to do here as well.

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