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Toward a Materialist History of Ideas: History, Contradictions, and Possibilities

Mikkel Flohr

This essay contributes to the development of a Marxist approach to the history of ideas based on Marx's historical materialism. It first outlines historical materialism and its relevance to the study of the history of ideas and then traces its marginalization within the discipline back to Quentin Skinner's critique. The essay outlines Skinner's approach to the history of ideas before introducing and engaging one of the most successful subsequent attempts, by Ellen Meiksins Wood, to construct an alternative Marxist approach to the history of ideas. However, many contradictions in Wood's approach can be traced back to Skinner's influence, contradictions that may be resolved via the conceptual resources of Marx's historical materialism. The essay outlines a novel Marxist approach to the history of ideas, combining Marx's historical materialism with Wood's social history of political theory and exemplifying how this approach may be deployed.

Key Words: History of Ideas, Historical Materialism, Marxism, Political Theory, Social History

This essay is a reflection on and contribution to the development of a historical-materialist approach to the history of ideas. Marx approached and analyzed ideas as both expressions and effective parts of the central social and material relations within a given society, as well as their inherent contradictions.[1] As such, Marx's materialism should be considered a highly relevant starting point for understanding and interpreting ideas in relation to their historical context, which has been the raison d'être of the history of ideas for the last fifty years or so. Yet, there is not a strong Marxist tradition within the discipline, perhaps because Marx's materialism seems to deny the relevance of ideas. However, according to Marx, ideas were both a reflection and an effective part of the central social and material

1. While the historical-materialist tradition includes numerous subsequent thinkers, this essay will focus exclusively on Marx's initial contributions. Note that I use "Marxist," "historical-materialist," and "materialist" synonymously throughout this essay. For a discussion of Marx's concept of materialism, see Søren Mau (2022, 109–13), Patrick Murray (1990), and Étienne Balibar (1995, 23ff); for relevant critiques of so-called "new materialism," see Andreas Malm (2018), Dominique Routhier (2024), and Peter Osborne (2024).

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conditions of a given society - from the dominant ideology to real abstractions such as the value form—as well as their inherent contradictions.

In this essay, I introduce Marx's historical materialism and its potential relevance to the study of the history of ideas, before highlighting two of the central reasons for its marginalization within the discipline, namely its seeming disregard for ideas and Quentin Skinner's influential critique and dismissal of Marxist approaches to the history of ideas.[2] I then introduce and discuss the most successful subsequent attempt to construct a Marxist approach to the history of ideas, more specifically the "social history of political theory" developed by Ellen Meiksins Wood. However, I show how her social history of political theory consistently omits its starting point in Marx's thought. I proceed to illustrate that this can be understood as more than a mere coincidence: Wood's specific approach to the history of ideas efficiently reduces political ideas and their relevance to their specific historical context, which undermines her Marxist approach to the history of ideas insofar as the relevance of Marx's ideas are reduced to their original historical context. By confronting Wood's Marxist history of ideas with its theoretical genesis, it is possible to identify and overcome a series of contradictions in her approach. I use these to reconfigure and develop a novel materialist approach to the history of ideas, which I outline and exemplify in the final two sections.[3]

Marx's Historical Materialism

Karl Marx was trained as a philosopher but turned against philosophy's self-aggrandizing narrative of the history of philosophy as the progressive self-realization of spirit in and through world history presented by G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy of history, to formulate his historical materialism.[4] The starting point was Marx's distinctly Hegelian critique of Hegel. Hegel's (1977) philosophy claimed to overcome [*aufheben*] the opposition between thought and being through the self-realization of spirit in and through world history. However,

2. Note that the discipline of the history of ideas outlined here is heavily biased toward the history of political thought (as opposed to, for instance, natural sciences, etc.), a focus that I share and will not seek to redress in the following. However, it should be noted that this category itself must be historicized and revised insofar as it is premised on the distinctly capitalist bifurcation of social and political life (see, in particular, E. M. Wood 1995, 19–48) and has only been retrospectively applied to precapitalist history as a disciplinary organizing principle.

3. Note that, after the completion of this essay, a novel and highly promising outline of a historical-materialist approach to the history of political thought was published by Rafael Khachaturian (2024). This promising work should be engaged with in the future development and refinement of the materialist history of ideas.

4. Note that the concept of "historical materialism" was not used by Marx to describe his own thought. Friedrich Engels (e.g., 1989, 306) in some places wrote of the "materialist conception of history." The aforementioned concept appears to be a convenient shorthand invented by subsequent interlocutors.

matter remained subordinate to the spirit in Hegel's absolute idealism. Marx (1989, 19; 1987, 262; 1975a; 1975b; Marx and Engels 1976, 55–7, 61–2) argued that Hegel's philosophy was thus "standing on its head," insofar as it emphasized ideas over social and material reality, and therefore had to be "turned right side up again," which would go on to become the "guiding principle" of his historical materialism (see also Flohr 2021). Where Hegel had emphasized the primacy and determining influence of ideas on society, Marx (1987, 263) emphasized how the historical and social relations that governed the manner in which people reproduced their existence inevitably shaped their lived experiences and thinking, as well as their legal, political, philosophical, and religious conceptions and institutions:

> In the social production of their existence, human beings inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of human beings that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.[5]

Marx's basic point, contrary to Hegel, was that ideas were neither self-generating nor did they determine the organization of society independently. Rather, they were shaped by historically specific social relations and conditions that governed the reproduction of human beings' existence. Ideas therefore generally came to reflect the dominant social and political conditions while also forming an effective part of them and their continuous reproduction. "Theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses" as Marx (1975b, 182) explained; this material reconceptualization of ideas is the inverted legacy of Hegel's (1977, 10) theoretical sublation of the dichotomy between subject and substance.

The combined determination and efficacy of ideas in social and material relations is made evident in two primary ways. First, through the ruling class's active ideological production and dissemination of ideas, culture, and so on, which in various ways reflect and legitimize their rule, and hence "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas," as Marx and Engels (1976, 59) put it in *The German Ideology*. Here, they also explained that it was typically the members of the ruling class who had the time and means to develop and disseminate ideas and that these ideas often inadvertently reflected the conditions of their production. There is no suggestion that this was a deliberate or conscious effort: "The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the

5. I have substituted the unnecessarily gendered translation of the German *Mensch* as "man" for "human being."

dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas" (59). The dominant ideas produced by members of the ruling class are, in other words, essentially spontaneous affirmations of the given social relations that benefit them as natural, necessary, or just, although it would seem plausible that such ideas might also be consciously defended and promoted in times of crises.

Second, the social determination and efficacy of ideas can be seen in the constant use of and dependence on central ideas ("real abstractions"), such as property rights and exchange value, by all members of the population (irrespective of class) in their everyday lives. These ideas are so widespread and central to the organization and reproduction of social relations that they attain an objective or "real" social and material existence in and through their constant reenactment across society, which persists independently of individuals' belief in them. It does not matter whether an individual agrees with or believes in property rights because society is organized around them and they are, furthermore, guaranteed by the state. The same goes for the value form and money, which mediate everyone's ability to reproduce their existence. Marx (1978, 185) emphasized the practical existence and efficacy of such abstraction in the second volume of *Capital*, where he insisted, "Those who consider the autonomization of value as a mere abstraction forget that the movement of industrial capital is this abstraction in action" (see also Marx 1993, 164–5; Bhandar and Toscano 2015; Heinrich 2012, 49; Toscano 2010, 2019).

This did not mean, of course, that thinking was limited to a passive ideological reflection, reproduction, or legitimation of the dominant social relations, but simply that it was necessarily inscribed within and shaped by these social relations in one way or another, and it was, therefore, necessary to consider and address them to avoid being inadvertently led astray or otherwise determined by them.[6] Marx's work, for example, took the form of critical analyses of and revolutionary agitation against the very same social relations that he was inscribed within. Of course, the practice remained primary. Ideas could contribute to the practical struggle to overturn capitalist society but were not enough in themselves. The most classical formulation of this position is found in the 1844 "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," where Marx (1975b, 182) explained, in a passage I have already quoted from, that "the weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses." Here, it is evident that social and material relations take precedence over ideas without the latter therefore being negligible. Ideas reflect and form an effective part of these social relations and may contribute to the struggle to overthrow them.

6. Marx (1976, 3§1), for instance, insisted that idealism had been correct in emphasizing human activity in contradistinction to previous "contemplative" materialisms.

Marx highlighted and understood ideas as both fundamentally shaped by and an effective part of specific historical social relations and conflicts. As such, they often contained and expressed the central contradictions of these social relations in one way or another. This was the starting point of several of his works in which he analyzed and developed theories of concrete social and material relations and their inherent contradictions through an immanent (historical-materialist) critique of their most central and relevant theoretical representations, such as his critique of the modern state via Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* in "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law" or his critique of capital via the works of the bourgeois political economists in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1975a, 1990; see Colletti 1975, 37–40; Balibar 1994, 91). In these texts, Marx formulated his theories of the state and capital through an immanent critique of central theoretical accounts of them. More specifically, he identified the most relevant accounts of contemporary social relations in order to explore their theoretical contradictions and the underlying social and material contradictions they reflected, proceeding to develop an alternative theoretical account of them by exploring the contradictions of their theoretical representations.[7] As such, Marx's work is an obvious starting point and model for understanding and interpreting ideas in relation to their historical context, which has been the raison d'être of the history of ideas since the late 1960s.

Yet Marx and Marxism have only had a relatively limited impact within the discipline.[8] A large part of the reason is undoubtedly Quentin Skinner's (1969) polemical criticism of Marxist approaches to the history of ideas in his epoch-making essay "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," which became a kind of "manifesto" for the "Cambridge School" and exerted a decisive influence on the discipline as a whole (Gordon 2014, 32; Pocock 2009, 128).[9]

7. I use the subsequent term "immanent critique" here in an attempt to capture Marx's distinctly Hegelian form of critique as a form of sublation (*Aufhebung*), which does not remain external to its object, but deliberately accepts its logic and claims, in order to criticize it on its own terms and move through and overcome its inherent contradictions (reflecting underlying social and material contradictions) in a new and more adequate conceptual form. Here it is important to note that the claim to criticize an object on its terms is not a claim to be neutral; immanent critique is distinctly critical but accepts that there is no transcendent position outside of contemporary social relations from whence to formulate critique or judgment of them or their theoretical reflections (Adorno 1988, 29–33; Antonio 1981, 332–4; Harvey 1990, 5–6; Hegel 1969, 81–2; Jay 2023, 3–14).

8. A notable exception is Crawford Brough MacPherson's (1962) rereading of early modern English political philosophy as an expression and legitimation of capitalist social relations, which exercised significant influence until it was singled out for critique by Quentin Skinner amongst others. See Skinner (1969, 21, 40); for two overviews of the debates with diverging assessments see James Tully (1993, 71–95) and Jules Townshend (2000, 31–98).

9. Note that there is a newer, revised, and much less polemical version of Skinner's (2002c) essay. However, for historical accuracy, I continue to refer to the original version of the essay (i.e., Skinner 1969), which attained such a massive influence on the field.

Skinner's Contextualizing History of Ideas

In "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," Skinner proposed that ideas as expressed in historical texts and other sources constituted speech acts that had to be understood in relation to the specific context in which they were formulated and meant to intervene. It was, in Skinner's (1969, 38, 50–1) words, necessary to identify the historical questions, which they were formulated in response (see also Austin 1975, 1–6, 52, 147).[10] He framed this approach to the history of ideas via a polemical critique of two other approaches: On the one hand, he criticized what could be called "philosophical" approaches to historical texts that conceived them merely as attempts to answer supposedly "perennial questions" as part of a continuous and cross-historical dialogue. On the other hand, and more relevant for our present purposes, Skinner (1969, 3, 4ff, 39ff; Li and Skinner 2016, 126–7) also formulated a critique of what I call "sociological" approaches to the history of ideas, including Marxism, which he accused of reducing political texts and ideas to derivative effects of underlying social forces, supposedly neglecting both the intentions of the author and the political significance of the ideas themselves.[11]

Skinner (1969, 49) summarized his alternative approach to the history of ideas as follows:

> The essential question which we ... confront, in studying any given text, is what its authors, in writing at the time [they] did write for the audience [they] intended to address, could in practice have been intending to communicate by the utterance of this given utterance. It follows that the essential aim, in any attempt to understand the utterances themselves, must be to recover this complex intention on the part of the author. And it follows from this that the appropriate methodology for the history of ideas must be concerned, first of all, to delineate the whole range of communications which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by the utterance of the given utterance, and, next, to trace the relations between the given utterance and this wider linguistic context as a means of decoding the actual intention of the given writer.[12]

Skinner identified the object of inquiry, the meaning of a particular historical text or utterance, with the authorial intent behind the text understood as a speech act and an intervention in its historical context. He argued that this could and should

10. Note that Skinner is paraphrasing Robert George Collingwood (1939, 31).

11. Skinner here misconstrues Marx's materialist reconceptualization relationship between ideas and social forces (see previous section). However, he is correct to note that a materialist approach to the history of ideas would not reduce the significance of texts to authorial intent but would instead insist on their wider political significance.

12. I substitute the unnecessarily gendered (male) pronouns of the abstract figure of the author in this passage for "they."

be recovered through the historical study and reconstruction of the linguistic and argumentative context conceived in terms of the predominant preconceptions, conventions, assumptions, language, and contemporary debates amongst authors and other significant actors that framed and formed the text.[13]

According to Skinner (2002d, 150), any given text is an intervention in a particular historical context, which necessarily shapes it; the author needs to render their argument intelligible and legitimate within a particular context and as such must rely on many of the preconceptions, conventions, and norms that define it, even if they are attempting to shift them. As such even the radicals and revolutionaries are "obliged to march backwards into battle." Even the most original, radical, or revolutionary contributions to the history of political thought can only be understood in relation to the conventions of their specific historical context (this is also the only way that they can be identified as original, radical, and/or revolutionary). Skinner (1978, 1:xiii) outlined the promise and purpose of this approach in the introduction to his celebrated *Foundations of Modern Political Theory*:

> What exactly does this approach enable us to grasp about the classic texts that we cannot grasp simply by reading them? The answer, in general terms, is I think that it enables us to characterise what their authors were doing in writing them. We can begin to see not merely what arguments they were presenting, but also what questions they were addressing and trying to answer, and how far they were accepting and endorsing, or questioning and repudiating, or perhaps even polemically ignoring, the prevailing assumptions and convention of political debate. We cannot expect to attain this level of understanding if we only study the texts themselves. In order to see them as answers to specific questions, we need to know something about the society in which they were written. And in order to recognise the exact direction and force of their arguments, we need to have some appreciation of the general political vocabulary of the age.

The interpretation and understanding of the classical texts of political theory, in other words, presupposed the historical study and an understanding of their intellectual and linguistic context, the general political vocabulary of the age, and its contemporary deployments. Only on this basis, is it possible to truly understand what the authors of these texts were doing when they wrote them and, thus, grasp the meaning of the texts.[14]

13. Skinner (2002a, 113) subsequently conceded that historically contextualized authorial intent is only one amongst many different types of meaning that can be attributed to a given text. However, this was the only type of meaning that he considered and developed a method to discern.

14. Skinner (1972, 393) elsewhere insists that we should "avoid the vulgarity ... of supposing that we can ever hope to arrive at 'the correct reading' of a text."

The Social History of Political Theory

Wood challenged Skinner's approach to the history of ideas with inspiration from Marx, in the form of what she called the "social history of political theory." She criticized Skinner for reducing the context of historical texts to other texts: "Historical contexts, for [Skinner], are languages, utterances, words ... the social and material conditions in which words are deployed are deliberately excluded" (E. M. Wood 2008b, 5). This critique served to frame her alternative approach to the history of ideas, which expanded the historical context to include and emphasize the extra-textual, more specifically the social and political context, as a necessary precondition of grasping the meaning of historical texts (still identified with authorial intent). "To understand what political theorists are saying requires knowing what questions they are trying to answer, and those questions confront them not simply as philosophical abstractions, but as specific problems posed by specific historical conditions, in the context of specific practical activities, social relations, pressing issues, grievances and conflicts" (E. M. Wood 2008a, 3–4).[15] The contextualized interpretation of the history of political thought, in other words, should not simply result in a more comprehensive history of ideas, which, like the "philosophical" approach initially criticized by Skinner, ends up abstracting political theory from the very social and political context that it was intervening in.

As such, Wood's social history of political theory can be said to pursue Skinner and the Cambridge School's emphasis on historical contextualization beyond its original scope and to provide a corrective to their implicit intellectual and textual bias. Wood insisted that the classical texts of political theory should (primarily) be interpreted in relation to the social and political context that they were intervening in and addressing. Her partner Neal Wood (1978, 348; and see 1984, 4) contributed a practical outline of what such an analysis might incorporate and consider:

> We must determine the nature of the existing social structure of class divisions, of the prevailing system of status, the connection between class and status, and their relationship to the state. Which classes are rising and which are declining? To what degree do class awareness and class consciousness exist? How adequately is the class structure reflected in the governmental arrangements and the system of domination and subordination? What are the religious and ethnic division in society, and how do they relate to political and economic life? What are the models of acceptable social conduct? Finally, we must assess the various intellectual trends and schools of

15. It is interesting to note that this also opens up the possibility of interpreting such "practical activities" as a form of political theory, which might be particularly relevant in regard to reconstructing the political thought of subaltern movements that did not otherwise leave written theoretical reflections.

> thought, the central issues, and the way their conflict is related to the socio-political struggles of the period.

The social history of political theory had to (re)interpret historical texts about their social context, which involved a special focus on the development of the most central political structures, the dominant social property relations, the class structure, and other social identities, hierarchies, and conflicts—as well as the linguistic and ideological context—without thereby being reducible to any of them (N. Wood 1978, 348–9).[16] This became the starting point for Ellen Meiksins Wood's (2008a, 2012) impressive rereading of the history of political thought in the West from ancient Greece to the European Enlightenment, where the history of political thought must be understood in a double sense, encompassing both the history of political thought *and* a rereading of its contents as political interventions in its many different social and political contexts.[17]

Contradictions and Possibilities of the Social History of Political Theory

Despite Ellen Meiksins Wood's theoretical starting point, her social history of political theory never makes it to Marx. There is nothing particularly strange about this. The two volumes already cover a long period that stretches from Ancient Greece to the early modern period. For comparison, Quentin Skinner's (1978) two-volume *Foundations* covers a period from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. However, this omission can be understood as something much more significant; Marx must remain a blind spot in the social history of political theory insofar as this approach to the history of ideas methodologically limits the relevance of historical texts to their original historical context. Ellen Meiksins Wood (2008a, 16) explicitly warns, "If we abstract a political theory from its historical context, we in effect assimilate it to our own;" an approach that she rejects in favor of "understanding a theory historically." These statements reiterate Skinner's (1969, 52) preceding insistence on limiting the significance of the texts that constitute the history of political thought to their original historical context, dismissing the notion that they might contribute to contemporary political debate as absurd and insisting, "We must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves."[18] An interpretation of Marx on these methodological grounds would undermine his

16. "Social property relations" refers to historically determinate relations of production and is frequently deployed in the "political Marxist" tradition to emphasize their emergence as the contingent result of specific social dynamics struggles rather than historical teleology (Pal 2021, 103; see also Brenner 1976; E. M. Wood 2002).

17. This work has recently been reissued as a single volume; see E. M. Wood (2022).

18. Skinner (1969; 1978; 1988) nonetheless promotes a third concept of liberty—freedom as non-domination—recovered from classical republicans, as a superior alternative to liberal concepts of freedom as non-interference and the positive notion of freedom as self-realization.

relevance and thus also the basis of Wood's distinctly *Marxist* history of ideas and must therefore remain unwritten.[19] This historicist imperative derives from Skinner's approach to the history of ideas rather than Marx's historical materialism, and the internal contradictions of the social history of political theory are inherited from the former and may potentially be resolved via the latter. However, starting to outline these contradictions in more detail is relevant before showing how a historical-materialist approach might resolve them.

The historicist imperative that we both can or should avoid assimilating historical texts to our present is contradictory as all attempts to understand a historical text or theory in the present are, per definition, abstractions from its original context, rendering its historical meaning intelligible to a contemporary audience. As Pierre Bourdieu and Roger Chartier (1994, 16; 2002) observe, "A book changes by the fact that it does not change when the world changes." Although the careful study of the intellectual and social context can contribute to a better understanding of a given historical text today, the necessity of such an endeavor attests to the historical separation of the (contemporary) reader and the (historical) text. By definition, the contemporary reader of a historical text is always already engaged in interpreting history in terms of their present. Edward Hallett Carr (1990, 24) effectively summarized the inherent contradiction of historicism, "We can view the past, and achieve our understanding of the past, only through the eyes of the present."

Moreover, such interpretation necessarily involves the deliberate selection, organization, and interpretation of specific parts of both the historical text and its context; to construct a coherent interpretation of the text, irreducible to mere exposition of the text or context. It is always guided by contemporary concerns, from the historical divergences and disjunctures that need to be explained to render the argument intelligible to a contemporary audience and address the contemporary political concerns that might be illuminated by the text or may, conversely, illuminate the text. The interpretation of a historical text is a form of its translation from one historical context to another, and this may at the same time confront it with its own textual and historical limitations and possibilities, moving with and at times beyond it, potentially proceeding past mere commentary, transforming it and making a unique contribution to the history of political thought in its own right and as an intervention in its own social and political context.

Ellen Meiksins Wood (2008a, 15) at various points comes close to acknowledging this political potential but ultimately limits the significance of the social history of

19. For some recent examples of historical contextualizations of Marx's thought that efficiently bury its relevance in the past, see the works of Jonathan Sperber (2013) and Gareth Stedman Jones (2016). It is also relevant to note that Meiksins Wood's student George Comninel (2019, xv–xvii, 33–4) later wrote about Marx's thought within the tradition of the social history of political theory. He did not reflect on this contradiction but simply suspended this methodological imperative without any comment or reflection. The purpose of this essay is to develop and systematically explore how a reflexive and consistent Marxist approach to the history of ideas might be (re)configured.

political theory to the destabilization of dominant contemporary ideas through the exposition of their contingent historical ascent.[20] This sentiment is similar to the one expressed by Quentin Skinner (2002b, 6) in the introduction to *Visions of Politics*.[21] However, Margaret Leslie (1970, 436) challenges this approach, arguing that it efficiently reduces the study of the history of ideas to "a kind of *memento mori*" whose sole significance is "to remind us that our culture is not immortal." This is perhaps something of an exaggeration, but she is correct to note that this efficiently limits the contemporary significance of the history of political theory to a very basic and long-term negative or critical function, the erosion of dominant ideas, and denies the possibility that they (and less dominant ideas for that matter) may have something positive to contribute to an understanding of and/or intervention in the present. This is a strange claim, especially for a self-declared Marxist like Ellen Meiksins Wood (e.g., 1995), who elsewhere insists on the enduring relevance of Marx's ideas and whose work clearly shows the generative capacity of the (immanent) critique of dominant ideas, as I have already outlined.[22]

Wood's and Skinner's arguments for the indirect contemporary relevance of the history of ideas implicitly reveals two things that neither of them seem to have considered: First, that historical ideas can remain relevant and gain decisive importance outside their original historical context (i.e., the aforementioned dominant ideas) and that there is therefore no compelling reason to limit our understanding of them and their meaning to the original historical context. Second, the study of historical ideas, like its objects, can and must itself be understood as a (conscious or unconscious) political intervention in its historical context (and, potentially, beyond) insofar as it reproduces, develops, or challenges specific political ideas in a new historical context, a methodological (self-)reflection that both Wood and Skinner lack.[23] The insistence on reflexivity in the study of the history of ideas is neither meant to suggest the necessity of autobiographical excesses nor even necessarily the extended analysis of the contemporary social and political context. It is deployed solely to highlight the potential contemporary

20. However, it is important to note that a consistent historical-materialist approach would not consider the ascent of dominant ideas as entirely arbitrary but seek to examine their connection to the dominant social and material relations (and their contradictions) in more detail. See this essay's first section for more detail.

21. Both Wood's and Skinner's arguments have a certain affinity with Michel Foucault's genealogical approach in this regard—although he was much clearer about the contemporary significance of his genealogies and/as histories of the present. See, e.g., Foucault (1977a, 1977b, 1998, 2004).

22. Neal Wood (1978, 360–2, 366) comes closer to acknowledging the contemporary import of historical texts of political theory but ultimately reduces it to a potential model of the relation between theory and practice. This implicitly poses the question of whether the social history of political theory fits in this category and thus also the question of its own (undertheorized) contemporary political significance, which I will return to examine in the following.

23. For a fascinating intellectual contextualization of Quentin Skinner's contextualism, which does not, however, attempt to contextualize its account, see Emile Perreau-Saussine (2007).

social and political significance and use of the history of political thought today, which cannot and, indeed, should not be ignored. Rather, it must be reflexively incorporated and accounted for in engagements with the history of political thought.

Outline of a Materialist Approach to the History of Ideas

It is necessary for a materialist approach to the history of ideas to move beyond the contradictions of Wood's and Skinner's historicism and instead to pursue an interpretative approach to the history of political thought that acknowledges and can reflexively address its status as a part of this history, as a political intervention in its historical context. Here, historical materialism can function as a model and a guide insofar as it openly acknowledges its own normative political position without thereby giving up the ambition of providing sound historical analyses of its subject matter. In fact, the two are inherently interlinked within this tradition, which suggests the impossibility of remaining outside of or neutral in relation to the dominant social relations that we and our ideas are inscribed within. It, therefore, demands an explicit and self-reflexive political positioning.[24] This explicit political positioning does not challenge or undermine the capacity to produce accurate social and historical analyses. On the contrary, it places even greater demands on it, insofar as these analyses are meant to be able to support and help orientate contemporary political struggles.

Marx himself accomplished this in and through the immanent critique of dominant ideas, a form of critique that deliberately immersed itself in a given text, treating it as an expression and effective part of its particular historical context to explore and confront it with its inherent limitations and the social and material contradictions it might reflect and perpetuate. This distinctly critical approach explores and pursues the contradictions of a text in and as an expression and part of its social and material context, and these inherent contradictions become the basis of a new and more adequate theoretical account of its object, helping to orient contemporary political struggles. Additionally, it is possible to return to specific historical thinkers and deploy some of the same methodological tools to reinterpret and recover specific theoretical resources relevant for contemporary analytical and political purposes.

A reconfigured materialist approach to the history of ideas that embraces its political significance in this manner would be capable of consistently accounting for and developing its theoretical foundations in Marx's historical materialism (unlike Wood's social history of political theory). Such approach to the history of ideas

24. It is this distinctly political orientation (alongside its materialism) that sets this Marxist approach to the history of ideas apart from hermeneutical approaches (e.g., Heidegger 2010; Gadamer 1975) that likewise emphasize the productive reciprocity between past and present.

could combine the fundamental insights of Marx's historical materialism that ideas are both a reflection and an effective part of the central social and material relations of a given society (and their contradictions), which govern the reproduction of its members' existence, with the methodological prescriptions of Wood's social history of political theory. More specifically, this would involve a systematic contextualization of historical texts and ideas in relation to the dominant ideas and debates, as well as the development of the most central political structures, the dominant social property relations, the class structure, and its relation to other social identities, hierarchies, conflicts and contradictions that characterized their origin.

However, Wood's inherited historicism must be abandoned in favor of a materialist approach that explicitly embraces its status as both an attempt to understand the past and intervene in the present, thereby retaining the distinctly normative and political dimensions of both the original texts and subsequent engagements with them in and as the history of political thought. Materialism is not a neutral approach to the history of ideas; it is an engaged approach to both the history and present of ideas that actively and reflexively partakes in and tries to change the context and conditions of its own existence. To paraphrase Marx's (1976, 5§11) *Theses on Feuerbach*, the point is not only to interpret ideas but to analyze them as a means of achieving a better understanding of the social and material relations that animate them in order to be able to challenge and change them.

Such a novel materialist approach could be used to engage the history of ideas in several ways, in the following I will outline the two ways that I consider the most significant. First, it could be deployed to carry out immanent critiques of particularly significant theoretical representations of central social and material relations (and their contradictions) within a given society to better understand both these texts and the historical context they reflect and form an effective part of in relation to our own. This would provide both a better understanding of the texts and the social relations that they partake in and reflect both then and now. In this way the immanent critique and contextualization of central historical texts simultaneously exercises a critical and a generative function, challenging dominant ideas while generating new theoretical accounts of the central social and material relations and the contradictions they reflect and partake in. Second, this novel materialist approach to the history of ideas would not only be able to account for and develop its own theoretical origins in the works of Marx, but it would also offer the possibility of going beyond this genesis to recover other critical conceptual and analytical resources from past thinkers that can be redeployed to understand and intervene in the present conjuncture.[25]

25. While this does not, strictly speaking, require knowledge of its historical origin and context, it is likely to facilitate a better understanding of it and the ability to deploy it in a contemporary context.

Excursus

Whereas the initial form of Marxist engagement with the history of ideas is well-established in the Marxist canon, exemplified most prominently by Marx's immanent critique of political economy, the second is less common. I will therefore proceed to explore and exemplify this form of engagement with the history of political thought in order to recover or develop concepts, theories and/or perspectives on contemporary political issues via three interconnected yet heterogeneous historical examples. Starting from Niccolò Machiavelli, commonly conceived as the starting point of the modern (proto-materialist) tradition of political theory, these theories and/or perspectives can help to illustrate the potentials of such Marxist engagements with past writers in the development of contemporary political perspectives. Announcing the near completion of *De Principatibus*, in a letter addressed to Francesco Vettori in 1513, Machiavelli describes how, at the end of a long day, he would don his best clothes and enter his study, wherein he would open the history books composed by the classical writers and be transported by them into "the courts of the ancients and [be] welcomed by them ... I make bold to speak to them and ask the motives of their actions." He is clear that he is not just engaging in idle chatter but distilling and developing practical lessons from their experiences: "I have jotted down what I have profited from in their conversation and composed a short study, *De Principatibus*, in which I delve as deeply as I can into the ideas concerning this topic, discussing the definition of a princedom, the categories of princedoms, how they are acquired, how they are retained, and why they are lost" (1996, 264). The aforementioned *De Principatibus* is identical to Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which is framed as a guide to attaining and maintaining political power for Lorenzo de Medici in the mirror of princes-genre. In this text, Machiavelli (2005, 52) emphasizes the direct contemporary political relevance of studying and reflecting on history, "The prince must read histories and in them consider the deeds of excellent men ... Above all else, he must do as some eminent men before him have done, who elected to imitate someone who had been praised and honoured before them."[26]

Machiavelli's historically mediated reflections on how to attain and maintain power would subsequently serve as an inspiration for many significant political thinkers in a chain of influence similar to the one he outlined in the above quote. One of the most prominent examples is perhaps Antonio Gramsci, who

26. In the preface to the *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli (2003, 98–9; see also Althusser 1999, 43–8) goes even further and decries "the lack of a proper appreciation of history" that would help guide the Florentine government. *Discourses* was written, he explains, so that "those who read what I have to say may the more easily draw those practical lessons which one should seek to obtain from the study of history," that is to say, practical lessons "in constituting republics, in maintaining states, in governing kingdoms, in forming an army or conducting a war, in dealing with subjects, and in extending the empire."

engaged with Machiavelli's work during his imprisonment under Benito Mussolini's fascist regime in a series of notes for an incomplete book that was to be titled *The Modern Prince*. Here, Gramsci undertook the double task of interpreting Machiavelli's classical treatise and developing practical political lessons from it regarding the most efficient means of attaining and maintaining power for the modern prince, the communist party, in contemporary Western Europe. In his interpretation of *The Prince*, Gramsci highlights Benedetto Croce's argument that while Machiavelli addressed the book to Lorenzo de Medici, its eventual publication also made his political insights available to the wider public, and as such it remained politically neutral. Gramsci concedes that this may be true "in the abstract" but insists that "Machiavelli himself remarks that what he is writing about is in fact practised, and has always been practised, by the greatest men throughout history. So it does not seem that he was writing for those who are already in the know." Rather, Machiavelli should be understood as having written *The Prince* for "those who are not in the know"—those not in power, that is, for the popular and revolutionary classes—and, as such, this work has an "essentially revolutionary character." It is precisely this gesture Gramsci (2005, 135–6) wants to repeat with his "philosophy of praxis," i.e., "to develop a theory and technique of politics ... useful to the side which was 'not in the know,' since that is where the historically progressive force is to be found."[27] The philosophy of praxis that Gramsci developed based on his engagement with Machiavelli (and other significant influences) focused on strategies for uniting the subaltern in a historic block that could attain cultural and political hegemony, the details of which will not detain us here. The significant point is, as Margaret Leslie has convincingly shown, that the development of Gramsci's philosophy of praxis cannot be separated from his study of *The Prince.* The two were not only articulated alongside each other but informed and shaped each other as parts of the same process (Anderson 1976, 20–8, 49; Leslie 1970, 438; Thomas 2015, 97–117).

The same can be said for the work of a later Marxist, Louis Althusser, whose interest in Machiavelli was mediated by Gramsci's notebooks, and whose engagement with *The Prince* would play a central role in the development of his aleatory materialism (del Lucchese 2010; Elliot 1999, xiv; Elliot 1998, 75ff).[28] Althusser conceived Machiavelli as a central figure in the previously unrecognized "underground" philosophical tradition that he described as "aleatory materialism,"

27. Note that Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli in this respect echoes Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1998, 73) pronouncements in *The Social Contract*: "While pretending to give lessons to kings, he gave great ones to peoples. The Prince of Machiavelli is the book of Republicans."
28. Althusser (2005, 87–128) read both Gramsci and Machiavelli in the summer of 1961 and gave a course on the latter in 1962 while he was working on his seminal essay "Contradiction and Overdetermination." Althusser's (1999) primary engagement with Machiavelli is contained in his revised course manuscript from 1872, posthumously published as *Machiavelli and Us*. On Althusser's engagement with Gramsci and Machiavelli, see also Panagiotis Sotiris (2021).

(also including Baruch Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, etc.). Unlike the orthodox "Marxism" supposedly derived from the Second International, it did not rely on the thinly veiled idealism of historical teleology. Instead, it remained open to the contingent or aleatory aspects of history and as such was uniquely suited to the task of thinking the possibilities of revolutionary political practice and revolution in the contemporary conjuncture (Althusser 2006, 167–8; 1999, 18; Bargu 2015, 427–37). According to Althusser (2006, 266), Machiavelli's original contribution to this tradition, which he consciously sought to build on, was the recognition of the essentially contingent origin and potential instability of all political orders, and this recognition allowed him to study them from the perspective of their potential transformation through political practice—that is, from a revolutionary perspective that is against determinism and teleology, as he proposed in one interview: "Neither Marx nor Engels ever came close to proposing a theory of history, in the sense of the unforeseen, unique, aleatory historical event; nor did either of them propose a theory of political practice ... The one man to have thought the theory of political history, of political practice *in the* present, was Machiavelli. There is a tremendous gap to be closed here." Althusser's sustained engagement with Machiavelli's *The Prince* formed a central part of his development of such a nonteleological and revolutionary Marxist "theory of political history, of political practice in the present"—formulated against the prevailing orthodoxy within the communist movement, in the hopes of helping to better orientate the left-wing struggles and movements of his time (266, 172–4; see Althusser 1999).[29]

The point of these three examples is to illustrate the potential use of (materialist) engagements with the history of ideas, rereading and repurposing historical texts in new and different contexts, drawing on their original historical context and meaning: "There is no such thing as an innocent reading," as Althusser reminds us elsewhere (Althusser et al. 2015, 22). This does not mean that we can simply abdicate any responsibility for our interpretations of historical texts and subject them to the exigencies of our own historical situation and political needs. The point is to ensure transparency, coherence, and reflexivity regarding our engagement with and use of these texts in and as part of our present. In Althusser's words, "We must say what reading we are guilty of" (22).[30] The point of this essay has been to explore what type of reading a materialist approach to the history of ideas might make us guilty of.

29. For a critique of the limitations of Althusser's project by one of his former collaborators see Jacques Ranciére (2011).

30. Althusser's own analysis of the practice of reading historical texts was structured around his (rather unconvincing) attempt to establish Marx's (1990) *Capital* as the sole basis for the science of history—in opposition to Marx's earlier works and other (supposedly ideological) approaches (see, e.g., Althusser 2005; Althusser et al. 2015, 46). For a laudable attempt to extricate and develop a reading of Marx for other purposes, see Ellen Rooney (1995); also consider Althusser (2007) and Balibar (1994, 3–84).

Conclusion

This essay contributes to the construction of a materialist approach to the history of ideas that can move beyond the contradictions of contemporary historicism. The essay commenced with an outline of Marx's historical materialism and its distinct approach to ideas as both a reflection and an effective part of contemporary social and material relations as well as their inherent contradictions. Despite the obvious relevance of such an approach to the contextual study of the history of ideas, historical materialism has remained marginal within the discipline. I traced this marginalization to Skinner's critique in his paradigmatic 1969 "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," which criticized Marxism for reducing ideas to expressions of underlying social forces and undermining their political significance. I outlined the basic tenets of Skinner's highly influential contextual approach and Wood's impressive attempt to construct an alternative Marxist approach to the history of ideas. However, Skinner's implicit influence on Wood's approach meant that political ideas were systematically reduced to their historical context, rendering her incapable of accounting for her own theoretical starting point in Marx's historical materialism. Moreover, I showed how Skinner's and Wood's shared historicism rendered them incapable of reflexively addressing the political dimensions of their own work. Finally, I proceeded to show how such a reconfigured historical materialism might be able to move past the limits and contradictions of historicism and analyze ideas as a reflection and effective part of their contemporary social and material relations, while acknowledging and reflexively addressing its status as a part of this history, as a conscious political intervention in its own historical context.

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