

# Holding Lenin Together: Hegelianism and Dialectical Materialism— A Historical Excursus

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**Abstract:** Current reactivations of dialectical materialism often involve interpretations of Hegel and/or Marx guided by benefits of hindsight provided by contemporary Continental metaphysics. However, between Hegel's and Marx's nineteenth century, on the one side, and the early twenty-first century of present materialisms, on the other side, there lie the Russian/Soviet dialectical materialisms indebted to Engels as well as Hegel and Marx. Especially for any reactivation of dialectical materialism that takes seriously the interlinked *Naturphilosophie*, dialectics of nature, and philosophy of science crucial to the Soviets, revisiting this neglected history promises to be of philosophical as well as historical interest. Herein, I advance several connected theses: Starting with Plekhanov, Russian/Soviet Marxists are right to recognize in Hegel's "absolute idealism" numerous components crucial for a quasi-naturalist materialism; Lenin's break with Plekhanov is more political than philosophical, with the former never ceasing to be influenced by the dialectical materialism of the latter; Relatedly, Lenin is consistently both a dialectician and a materialist, with there being no pronounced break separating the Engelsian-Plekhanovite materialism of 1908's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* from the Hegelian dialectics of 1914's *Philosophical Notebooks*; Apropos Bukharin, by contrast, there indeed is a pronounced break between the mechanistic *Historical Materialism* of 1921 and the dialectical *Philosophical Arabesques* of 1937; Finally, the theoretical dimensions of Stalin's Thermidor can be seen with clarity and precision against the preceding historical background. I conclude by drawing from the Plekhanov-Lenin-Bukharin-Stalin sequence lessons for today's Hegelian dialectical materialists.

**Keywords:** Hegel, Plekhanov, Lenin, Bukharin, dialectics, materialism, naturalism

Between Friedrich Engels himself, on the one hand, and recent reactivations of the tradition of dialectical materialism, on the other hand, there lies a now almost entirely neglected and forgotten tradition of (post-)Engelsian *Naturdialektik*: the Russian-then-Soviet furtherances of dialectical materialist philosophies of nature and the natural sciences, starting in the late nineteenth century with some of Georgi Plekhanov's contributions (I deal with dialectical materialism à la Mao Tse-Tung, the other major non-Western strand of this orientation, in the first volume of my *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*<sup>1</sup>). For theoretical as well as

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<sup>1</sup> Johnston 2013, pp. 23-28

historical reasons, assessing the contemporary significance of a Hegel-inspired materialist dialectics requires doing intellectual justice to the dialectical materialism of non-Western Marxism. On my reading, V.I. Lenin's philosophical interventions with respect to both materialism and dialectics represent the most decisive developments for a dialectics of nature within the Russian/Soviet context—and this both because of these interventions' inherent philosophical qualities as well as because of the effective canonization of Lenin, including of such works as *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, in the Soviet Union. However, in addition to Plekhanov and Lenin, I will discuss a range of other relevant figures, including, most notably, Nicolai Bukharin and J.V. Stalin.

My critical examination of Plekhanov will focus on a relatively early text in conjunction with a later one: 1891's "For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel's Death" and 1908's *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (the latter being Plekhanov's last major theoretical work). The extended essay of 1891, a piece commemorating the life and thought of the towering giant of post-Kantian German idealism (as its title clearly announces), enables me to situate Plekhanov's perspectives on historical and dialectical materialism in relation to Hegelian, Marxian, and Engelsian ground. His 1908 summation of the philosophical foundations of Marxism permits an enhanced appreciation of these perspectives from the vantage point of the end of his career.

Neither Plekhanov's political radicalism nor his qualified Hegelianism emerge *ex nihilo* within nineteenth-century Russia. As Guy Planty-Bonjour nicely and carefully documents in his 1974 study *Hegel et la pensée philosophique en Russie, 1830-1917*, such forerunners as Vissarion Grigor'evi Belinskij, Aleksandr Ivanovich Herzen, Nikolaj Vladimirovi Stankevi, Timofey Nikolayevich Granovsky, and Mikhail Alexandrovich Bakunin pave the way for much of what is involved in Plekhanov's Marxist syntheses of Hegelianism with materialism. In addition to these domestic predecessors as well as the profound foreign influence of Karl Marx, Plekhanov is deeply indebted to Engels, including the author of *Dialectics of Nature*, *Anti-Dühring*, and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (i.e., precisely the Engels defending a *Naturdialektik*). In fact, Plekhanov's quite Engelsian rendition of dialectical materialism is the key link bridging between Engels's and Lenin's connected philosophical positions—and this despite the political rift that opened between Plekhanov and Lenin in the early 1900s as well as Lenin's complaints about Plekhanov's allegedly inadequate appreciation of G.W.F. Hegel and Hegelian dialectics. One finds in the philosophical writings of Plekhanov a quasi-Hegelian materialism anticipating what later arises in and through the combination of Lenin's *Materialism and*

*Empirio-Criticism* with his *Philosophical Notebooks*.

Near the beginning of "For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel's Death," Plekhanov remarks that, "the most consistent materialist will not refuse to admit that each particular philosophical system is no more than the intellectual expression of its time."<sup>2</sup> Of course, this is an obvious endorsement of the Hegel who, in the deservedly renowned preface to 1821's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, asserts that, "each individual is... a *child of his time*."<sup>3</sup> Plekhanov considers this to be a proto-Marxian historical materialist thesis, given historical materialism's emphases on superstructural phenomena, up to and including philosophy itself, as arising from and remaining grounded by their time-and-place-specific infrastructural bases. However, he proceeds, later in "For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel's Death," to play off historical materialism against a feature of Hegel's 1821 preface closely related to this "*child of his time*," namely, the (in)famous Owl of Minerva. Following Engels especially, Plekhanov protests that post-Hegelian historical materialism, unlike Hegelian philosophy and contrary to Hegel's assertions embodied by the Owl of Minerva, enjoys a foresight with predictive power as regards the future.<sup>4</sup>

Not only does Plekhanov (as does Lenin too) take over from Engels the narrative about the history of philosophy being organized around the battle lines between the "two great camps" of idealism and materialism—he likewise knowingly inherits Engels's ambivalence about Hegel, an ambivalence manifest in placements of Hegel's philosophy as straddling the contested border between idealist and materialist territories. As does Engels, so too does Plekhanov repeatedly deploy variations on Marx's distinction between "the rational kernel" and "the mystical shell" within Hegelianism.<sup>5</sup> Echoing *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* in particular,<sup>6</sup> he asserts that, "As long as Hegel remains true to the dialectical method, he is a highly progressive thinker"<sup>7</sup> and that, "The dialectical method is the most powerful scientific weapon bequeathed by German idealism to its successor, modern

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2 Plekhanov 1974, p. 457

3 Hegel 1991, p. 21

4 Plekhanov 1974, pp. 475, 478-479; Johnston 2017 [forthcoming]

5 Wetter 1958, p. 397

6 Engels 1941, pp. 11-13, 24)

7 Plekhanov 1974, p. 477

materialism.”<sup>8</sup> Once “freed from its mystic wrappings,”<sup>9</sup> the Hegelian dialectic, in and through historical and dialectical materialism, can and does realize its revolutionary potential (with both Engels and Plekhanov equating, as regards Hegel’s philosophy, dialectics with this philosophy’s rational kernel and its purported idealism with its mystical shell).

Plekhanov, while paying Hegel the backhanded compliment of being the most systematic of idealists, nonetheless contends that, despite Hegel’s impressive systematicity, his idealism still remains plagued by inconsistencies.<sup>10</sup> In Plekhanov’s view, these inconsistencies are symptomatic of that fact that, “*materialism is the truth of idealism.*”<sup>11</sup> However, this leads him to an immanent critique of Hegel according to which Hegel’s alleged idealist inconsistencies are such as to lead into this idealism’s auto-dialectical, self-sublating transformation into Marxian materialism.<sup>12</sup>

A few other features of Plekhanov’s materialist evaluations of Hegel in “For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel’s Death” warrant notice here. First of all, Plekhanov displays an acute awareness of the significant difference, often overlooked by Hegel’s critics, between subjective and objective/absolute idealisms (so too does the Lenin of the *Philosophical Notebooks*, as will be observed below shortly). He stresses that the idealism of Hegel is not, by contrast with that of Immanuel Kant, subjectivist.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, and in relation to the infamous “*Doppelsatz*” from the preface to 1821’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*—this is the notorious thesis according to which “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational” (*Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig*)<sup>14</sup>—Plekhanov praises Hegel for rendering *die Vernunft* immanent to *die Wirklichkeit*, with this realism of reason proposing that human history as well as material nature are knowable thanks to being objectively structured in rational ways in and of themselves.<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, this Plekhanov of 1891 endorses certain features of

.....  
8 Ibid., p. 477)

9 Ibid., p. 478)

10 Ibid., p. 463)

11 Ibid., p. 468)

12 Ibid., p. 468)

13 Ibid., p. 473)

14 Hegel 1970, p. 24; Hegel 1991, p. 20

15 Plekhanov 1974, p. 482

the historical and economic dimensions of Hegel’s *Geistesphilosophie*. He approvingly highlights the recognition by Hegel of the problems and challenges posed by the “rabble” (*Pöbel*).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, he maintains that Hegel’s recourse to economics (i.e., “political economy”) help open up paths towards historical materialism proper (Plekhanov here foreshadows the Georg Lukács of 1938’s *The Young Hegel*).

Two points in “For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel’s Death” recur in *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*. First, both texts credit Hegel—“For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel’s Death” also credits Schelling with this too—with forging a compatibilist resolution of the freedom-determinism antinomy as subsequently taken up by Engels in particular<sup>17</sup> (I have dealt with Engels’s supposedly Hegelian compatibilism elsewhere<sup>18</sup>). Second, Plekhanov, in both 1891 and 1908, contrasts Hegelian models of historical development with the (pseudo-) evolutionist gradualisms associated, within turn-of-the-century Marxism, with the Second International and Menshevism. Basing himself on the Hegelian logical dialectics of quality and quantity (as does Engels before him and Lenin after him), he reasonably argues that, for Hegel, there is revolution *qua* sudden and abrupt leaps as well as evolution *qua* slow and steady progress<sup>19</sup> (incidentally, this argument of Plekhanov’s indicates he is not quite so guilty of the total neglect of Hegel’s logical dialectics with which Lenin sometimes charges him<sup>20</sup>). In the notes on *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* taken by Lenin, he places a “NB” (*nota bene*) next to Plekhanov’s stressing of the revolutionary in addition to the evolutionary.<sup>21</sup> Planty-Bonjour, speaking of Plekhanov and Lenin,<sup>22</sup> suggests that, “The opposition between the two men is more political than philosophical.”<sup>23</sup>

*Fundamental Problems of Marxism* also maintains that the combination of Hegel with Ludwig Feuerbach is the key to understanding Marx and Engels.<sup>24</sup> For Plekhanov, Feuerbach’s prioritization of being

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16 Ibid., p. 471-472; Hegel 2002, p. 99; Hegel 1979, pp. 170-171; Hegel 1991, §244-246 pp. 266-268], §248 pp. 269;  
Hegel 1999, pp. 255-256; Johnston 2017.

17 Plekhanov 1974, pp. 476-477; Plekhanov 1969, pp. 90-92, 143-144, 146

18 Johnston 2017.

19 Plekhanov 1974, p. 480; Plekhanov 1969, p. 45

20 Lenin 1976, pp. 357, 360

21 Ibid., p. 404

22 Planty-Bonjour 1974, pp. 272-273

23 Ibid., p. 273

24 Plekhanov 1969, p. 25

over thinking in his critique of Hegel's allegedly idealist privileging of thought is a crucial precondition for Marxist post-Hegelian materialism<sup>25</sup> (likewise, in his notes on Engels's *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, he appeals to the histories of pre-human and pre-organic nature so as to argue, long before Quentin Meillassoux, that, "Idealism says: *without a subject there is no object*. The history of the earth shows that *the object existed long before the subject appeared*, i.e., long before any organism appeared which had any perceptible degree of consciousness"<sup>26</sup>). On Plekhanov's assessment, not only is this specific Feuerbachian criticism fully justified—he adds a reiteration of the old charge of teleology according to which Hegelian "Universal Spirit" dictates that reality conform to a (quasi-)secular theodicy. Plekhanov contrasts this to a non-teleological "modern dialectical materialism."<sup>27</sup>

However, both implicitly and explicitly, this same Plekhanov of 1908 continues to praise Hegel despite objections raised to his absolute idealism. Hegelian dialectics permits a proper appreciation and grasp of the complex reciprocal interactions and immanent antagonistic negativities within societies between their infrastructures and superstructures<sup>28</sup> (Plekhanov is here anything but a crude mechanical economic reductionist). Additionally, Hegel's dialectical philosophy facilitates navigating between the opposed one-sided extremes of theories of history emphasizing the agency of either "great men" or anonymous structures.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Plekhanov characterizes Kantianisms as "the principal bulwark in the struggle against materialism."<sup>30</sup> Hence, Hegel's devastating critiques of Kant can and should be enlisted in the service of the struggle for materialism.<sup>31</sup> Finally, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* voices historical materialist approval of Hegel's acknowledgment (at the end of the introduction to his lectures on the Philosophy of World History<sup>32</sup>) of the importance of geographical forces and factors at the contingent, factual basis of the trajectories of

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25 Feuerbach 2012, p. 168; Plekhanov 1969, pp. 28, 30-31, 45, 83

26 Plekhanov 1974, p. 519

27 Plekhanov 1969, p. 110

28 Ibid., pp. 52, 64, 71; Plekhanov 1974, pp. 488-489

29 Plekhanov 1969, p. 149; Plekhanov 1974, p. 525

30 Plekhanov 1969, p. 90, 97

31 Plekhanov 1974, pp. 512-514

32 Hegel 1956, pp. 79-102

human history.<sup>33</sup>

Consistent with Planty-Bonjour's above-quoted assertion of philosophical proximity, despite political distance, between Plekhanov and Lenin, I would contend that the former's Engelsian synthesis of Hegelian absolute idealism with Marxian historical materialism is the direct Russian forerunner of Leninist dialectical materialism.<sup>34</sup> Standard Soviet wisdom came to have it that Lenin's materialism is to be found in 1908's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and his dialectics in the *Philosophical Notebooks* of 1914.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, and as I will show in what follows, texts by Lenin directly addressing philosophical concerns from 1913 onward reveal that the Soviet construal of his dialectical materialism is not inaccurate.

However, a number of non-Soviet Marxists/leftists have challenged the official Soviet equation according to which Lenin's dialectical materialist philosophy equals *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* plus the *Philosophical Notebooks*. One of Western Marxism's trademark tactics is to play off a good Marx against a bad Engels (with these maneuvers often resembling the psychoanalytic defense mechanism of "splitting" à la Kleinian object-relations theory). In line with this tactical template, many Western Marxists likewise separate a bad *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (guilty of the crudeness of Engelsian-Plekhanovite materialism and naturalism) from a good *Philosophical Notebooks* (perceived as closer to the [quasi- or pseudo-]Hegelianisms of non-Marxist theoretical currents on the European Continent of the twentieth century). Regarding the Lenin of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Helena Sheehan remarks, "Not surprisingly, most of the authors hostile to Engels are equally hostile to Lenin and speak of him in the very same terms."<sup>36</sup>

Planty-Bonjour detects tensions between Lenin's key philosophical texts of 1908 and 1914.<sup>37</sup> Other non/anti-Soviet authors go further. The Maurice Merleau-Ponty of *Adventures of the Dialectic* issues an early-Lukács-inspired condemnation of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*<sup>38</sup> (the later Lukács, in 1947's *Existentialisme or marxisme?*, already objects to the narrative according to which Lenin's emphases on materialism

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33 Plekhanov 1969, p. 49

34 Jordan 1967, p. 208

35 Bukharin 2005, pp. 307, 328, 337, 372; Planty-Bonjour 1967, pp. 29, 79, 91, 98

36 Sheehan 1993, p. 141

37 Planty-Bonjour 1974, p. 317

38 Merleau-Ponty 1973, pp. 59-65, 67

eclipse dialectics in his thinking<sup>39</sup>—and this in addition to his public damning of Merleau-Ponty following the publication, in 1955, of *Adventures of the Dialectic*<sup>40</sup>). Henri Lefebvre advocates abandoning *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* in favor of the *Philosophical Notebooks* alone.<sup>41</sup> Michael Löwy tries to stress philosophical as well as political differences between Plekhanov and a later Lenin said to have left behind the allegedly “stupid materialism” of 1908 under the beneficial influence of “intelligent” dialectical idealism<sup>42</sup> (with, more recently, Stathis Kouvelakis echoing some of Löwy’s assertions along these lines<sup>43</sup>). And, Raya Dunayevskaya and her student Kevin Anderson devote gallons of ink to driving a wedge repeatedly between a supposedly deplorable, vulgar *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and a laudable, sophisticated *Philosophical Notebooks*.<sup>44</sup> An author less invested in these disputes, historian David Joravsky, speaks of “a greater emphasis on dialectics” in Lenin’s notes on Hegel’s *Science of Logic* “than one can find in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*.”<sup>45</sup> Gustav Wetter similarly judges that, “Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*... represent an advance, philosophically speaking, on his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and show how thoroughly he had grasped the nature of dialectic.”<sup>46</sup>

Lefebvre, Löwy, Kouvelakis, Dunayevskaya, Anderson *et al*, in playing off the *Philosophical Notebooks* against *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, presuppose that the absolute idealism of Hegelian dialectical-speculative philosophy is anti-realist and anti-naturalist. They also posit that 1914 marks a sharp break in Lenin’s philosophical itinerary (akin to the thesis of the alleged 1845 break in Marx’s development associated with classical, mid-1960s Althusserianism<sup>47</sup>). Treatments by me of Hegel elsewhere<sup>48</sup> already go a long way towards fundamentally undermining the picture of Hegelian thought presupposed by Lefebvre and company

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39 Lukács 1961, pp. 251-252

40 Lukács 1956, pp. 158-159

41 Lefebvre 1971, p. 229

42 Löwy 1973, pp. 132-133, 139-140, 142; Löwy 1973, pp. 151, 153-154

43 Kouvelakis 2007, pp. 173-175, 187-189

44 Dunayevskaya 1973, pp. 95-120, 204; Dunayevskaya 2002, pp. 50, 69, 105, 167, 214-215, 217, 251; Anderson, 1995, pp. 4, 14, 23, 40, 42, 58-60, 64-65, 78-81, 95, 102-103, 174-175; Anderson 2007, pp. 125-127

45 Joravsky 1961, p. 20

46 Wetter 1958, pp. 130-131

47 Johnston , 2018

48 Johnston 2017; Johnston 2018

(as well as many, many others). Apropos the positing of the *Philosophical Notebooks* as a sharp, abrupt rupture with Lenin’s pre-1914 philosophical positions, I can begin by referring to Dominique Lecourt, one of Louis Althusser’s students. After glossing Lecourt’s work on this topic, I then will add further criticisms of attempts to quarantine *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* in relation to the *Philosophical Notebooks* and associated later texts by Lenin.

Lecourt, in his 1973 study *Une crise et son enjeu: Essai sur la position de Lénine en philosophie* (published in Althusser’s *Theorie* series at François Maspero), adamantly opposes the by-then commonplace splitting of Lenin into crude materialist (1908) and subtle dialectician (1914).<sup>49</sup> On Lecourt’s reading of Lenin’s philosophical writings, the primacy/priority of being over thinking, a thesis central to *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*,<sup>50</sup> remains the ultimate load-bearing tenet of Lenin’s materialist philosophy throughout the entire rest of his career.<sup>51</sup> According to Lecourt, a key aspect of Hegel valued by the later, 1914-and-after Lenin (as well as valued by Engels<sup>52</sup>) is the sustained, multi-pronged assault on the anti-realist subjectivism of Kant’s transcendental idealism.<sup>53</sup> That is to say, Lenin, in the *Philosophical Notebooks* and elsewhere, is interested in a specifically materialist harnessing of the Hegelian problematization of Kantian subjectivist anti-realism.<sup>54</sup> By Lecourt’s lights, scientific “crises” of the sort motivating Lenin’s 1908 philosophical intervention—as is well known, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is a response to the overthrow of Newtonian physics and idealist attempts to capitalize philosophically on this scientific upheaval—are the underlying root catalysts for Lenin’s recourse to Hegelian dialectics.<sup>55</sup> Relatedly, Lecourt maintains that dialectics always and invariably remains subordinated to materialism—this is a materialism, moreover, indebted to and informed by the empirical, experimental sciences of knowable natural objectivities—in Leninist dialectical materialism.<sup>56</sup>

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49 Lecourt 1973, pp. 14-15

50 Lenin 1972, pp. 38-39, 50-51, 78-79, 86, 106, 167-168, 220, 270-272

51 Lecourt 1973, pp. 31-33; Pannekoek 2003, pp. 109-110; Graham 1972, p. 402

52 Engels 1975, p. 14

53 Lecourt 1973, p. 51, 55, 57-58, 61-62, 65-67

54 Wetter 1968, p. 121

55 Lecourt 1973, p. 98-102, 107

56 Ibid., p. 48

Incidentally, a younger, more traditionally Marxist Lefebvre (1957) even goes so far as to defend Lenin's "reflection theory," one of the elements of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* most despised by those pitting the *Philosophical Notebooks* against this 1908 treatise. On Lefebvre's interpretation, the thesis that thinking "reflects" being is an essential axiom for materialism as involving anti-dualist immanentism, an immanentism according to which thinking is internal to and a moment of being.<sup>57</sup> Lefebvre's then-comrade, French Communist Party (PCF) philosopher Roger Garaudy, contemporaneously (1956) offers the same defense of Leninist reflection<sup>58</sup> (with a similar point already being alluded to, also in the French Marxist context, by Trần Duc Thao [1951] apropos dialectical materialism generally<sup>59</sup>). This 1957 Lefebvre also anticipates certain of Lecourt's points, especially those pertaining to the anti-subjectivist objectivity of the dialectics of Hegel's absolute idealism as a foreshadowing of full-fledged materialism.<sup>60</sup>

Lecourt's arguments against those who divide Lenin's philosophical works by setting the *Philosophical Notebooks* against *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* so as to dismiss the latter can and should be supplemented by additional assertions. To begin with, whereas the post-1914 Lenin has *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* widely distributed in official published form, he never sees fit to publish the *Philosophical Notebooks*. This is not at all to say that what the later Lenin indeed does publish disavows or shows no ties to the content of his 1914 commentary on Hegel's *Science of Logic*.

Instead, and as I will demonstrate below shortly, Lenin's published philosophy-related writings both contemporaneous with and subsequent to the *Philosophical Notebooks* fuse the Engelsian-Plekhanovite, science-shaped materialism of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* with Hegelian dialectics. This runs contrary to the claims of Löwy, Dunayevskaya, and associates, who, as noted above, contend that a break occurs resulting in 1908's materialism being jettisoned altogether in favor of 1914's dialectics. I think the textual evidence suggests otherwise. As Lenin himself indicates, the position he defends is called "dialectical materialism" with good reason.<sup>61</sup>

Lenin, like Marx, Engels, and Plekhanov before him, knowingly takes

57 Lefebvre 1957, p. 130

58 Garaudy 1956, pp. 50, 60

59 Trần Duc Thao 1986, p. 172

60 Lefebvre 1957, p. 181, 183-185

61 Lenin 1972, p. 284

over and absorbs elements of pre-Marxian materialism.<sup>62</sup> For all four of these militant materialists, although philosophical materialisms from the ancient Greek atomists through Feuerbach problematically are lacking in historical and dialectical sensibilities, these materialisms nonetheless are crucial precursors making possible what eventually arises in the mid-to-late nineteenth century as historical/dialectical materialism proper. Moreover—this again contests the thesis of a 1914 rupture with the materialism of 1908—the later Lenin encourages his comrades to immerse themselves in close study of Plekhanov's philosophical writings.<sup>63</sup>

I turn now to some of Lenin's texts themselves. My focus in what follows will be on facets of what could be called a "dialectical naturalism" operative within Lenin's materialist philosophy. I already deal with *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* along similar lines in the first volume of my *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*.<sup>64</sup> Here, I will offer selective interpretations of four particular texts by Lenin: "The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism" (1913), "Conspectus of Hegel's *The Science of Logic*" (1914), "On the Question of Dialectics" (1915), and "On the Significance of Militant Materialism" (1922).

As is well known, the triad referred to in the title "The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism" is none other than "German philosophy, English political economy and French socialism."<sup>65</sup> This essay, roughly contemporaneous with the *Philosophical Notebooks*, promptly goes on to insist that the philosophical core of Marxism is a materialism indebted to its historical predecessors (including the mechanical materialists of eighteenth-century France).<sup>66</sup> For this Lenin, Marx's main philosophical accomplishment is the synthesis of pre-Marxian materialism with Hegel-inspired dialectics.<sup>67</sup> What is more, this 1913 essay continues to invoke the motif of the two opposed, struggling camps of idealism and materialism as per Engels, Plekhanov, and *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.<sup>68</sup> Herein, Lenin associates idealism

62 Pannekoek 2003, p. 129

63 Lenin 1971, p. 27; Lenin 1975, p. 658; Lenin 1971, p. 660; Lenin 1922

64 Johnston 2013, pp. 13-38

65 Lenin 1975, p. 641

66 Ibid., pp. 641-642

67 Ibid., p. 641

68 Sheehan 1993, pp. 126-129

with religion and materialism with science.<sup>69</sup> Hence, a mere year before the *Philosophical Notebooks*, Lenin continues to insist that Marxist philosophy is, first and foremost, a natural-science-informed materialism.

But, what about the *Philosophical Notebooks* of 1914? As I already indicated, my gloss upon these incredibly rich set of reflections on and responses to Hegel by Lenin will be highly selective. Given my precise purposes in the current context, I am interested particularly in the place of naturalism in Lenin's serious materialist engagement with the speculative dialectics of the *Science of Logic*.

However, before turning to the naturalist dimensions of the dialectical materialism characterizing the *Philosophical Notebooks*, I once again feel compelled to highlight some additional details further problematizing the thesis of Dunayevskaya *et al* positing a 1914 break by Lenin with his pre-1914 philosophical positions (as espoused primarily in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*). Those maintaining the existence of this purported rupture consider Lenin *circa* 1908 as too wedded to ostensibly "bad" *qua* crude/vulgar Engelsian and Plekhanovite ideas. As I noted a short while ago, partisans of this supposed break rely upon contentious assumptions about discontinuities between Hegel, on the one hand, and both Engels and Plekhanov, on the other hand.

But, what is more, Dunayevskaya and her ilk, in holding up Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* as amounting to a purported split with his prior Engelsian and Plekhanovite commitments, tend to ignore the obvious continuities and overlaps between how Engels, Plekhanov, and Lenin all critically yet sympathetically read Hegel. That is to say, Lenin's appreciations of Hegelian dialectics in 1914 partly echo those already articulated by these two Marxist predecessors of his. Examples along these lines in the *Philosophical Notebooks* include: approval of Hegel's emphasis on immanent self-development<sup>70</sup>; endorsement of absolute idealism's critique of Kant's anti-realist subjectivism specifically and subjective idealisms generally<sup>71</sup>; praise of the Hegelian dialectic for its multidimensional fluidity and nimble dynamism<sup>72</sup>; agreement with Hegel's criticism according to which Kant, in his excessive "tenderness for things,"<sup>73</sup> refuses to recognize the ontological objectivity of

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69 Lenin 1975, p. 641

70 Lenin 1976, p. 89

71 Ibid., pp. 91-93, 130, 168, 175, 183, 194, 196-197, 207

72 Ibid., pp.100, 110, 141, 224)

73 Hegel 1969, p. 237; Hegel 1991, §48 p. 92; Hegel 1955, p. 451

kinetic contradictions within real beings *an sich*<sup>74</sup>; reiteration that comprehending Marx requires comprehending Hegel<sup>75</sup>; and, crediting Hegel with anticipating and making possible historical materialism.<sup>76</sup> Insofar as the Hegel of the *Philosophical Notebooks* bears multiple resemblances to the Hegel of Engels and Plekhanov, this Lenin does anything but cleanly and completely separate himself here from the Engelsian and Plekhanovite influences shaping his thinking prior to 1914.

Immediately before turning to Hegel's treatment of the category of appearance in "The Doctrine of Essence" (i.e., the second of the three major divisions of Hegelian *Logik*), Lenin declares, "Continuation of the work of Hegel and Marx must consist in the *dialectical* elaboration of the history of human thought, science and technique."<sup>77</sup> As in 1908, so too in 1914: Science remains a crucial component of Leninist materialism, which seeks, following in Engels's footsteps, to dialecticize (the study of) nature as well as the domains of humanity's ideas and activities (similarly, this Lenin of 1914 audibly echoes the Engels of *Dialectics of Nature*, for better or worse, when he writes of "not things, but the laws of their movement, materialistically"<sup>78</sup>). Soon after this just-quoted declaration, Lenin's naturalism begins to emerge even more explicitly in the *Philosophical Notebooks* with his exclamation, "Down with Gott, there remains *Natur*."<sup>79</sup> What is left after sweeping away narratives about transcendent, top-down divine creation *ex nihilo*—a little earlier in the *Philosophical Notebooks*, Lenin insists that all emergences are out of something instead of nothing<sup>80</sup>—is immanent, bottom-up genesis starting from the brute givenness of mere, sheer natural being(s) ultimately prior to all sentience and sapience.<sup>81</sup>

Lenin's agreement with Engels's and Plekhanov's praise for the robust realism of Hegelian absolute idealism already involves Lenin repeatedly recognizing that, for Hegel, logical categories are as much a matter of objective-natural being as of subjective-human thinking.<sup>82</sup> What

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74 Lenin 1976, pp. 135-136, 228

75 Ibid., pp. 180, 211, 213

76 Ibid., pp. 189-191

77 Ibid p. 147

78 Ibid p. 94

79 Ibid, p. 155

80 Ibid., p. 133

81 Ibid., p. 171

82 Ibid pp. 91-93, 130, 175, 183, 196-199, 201, 222

is more, the *Philosophical Notebooks*, despite the focus on the *Science of Logic*, make a number of references to Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* as represented in the second volume of the *Encyclopedia*, the portion of the System immediately succeeding Logic. On a single page, Lenin emphasizes the “*Closeness to materialism*” of both this Philosophy of Nature as well as the general Hegelian conception of substance as per the movement from substantiality to subjectivity.<sup>83</sup> And, despite Lenin's reservations regarding what he sees as the anti-materialist aspects of the Hegelian narrative of the passing over from *Logik* to *Naturphilosophie*—Lenin even derides (“Ha-ha!”) what he takes to be Hegel's account of the transition from the logical Idea to real-philosophical Nature<sup>84</sup>—Hegel's Logic-concluding identification of the Idea with Nature strikes Lenin as a gesture that “brings one within a hand's grasp of materialism.”<sup>85</sup>

Additionally, the *Philosophical Notebooks* express an appreciation for the opposition of a speculative dialectics “full of content and concrete”<sup>86</sup> to empty “formalism.”<sup>87</sup> Admittedly, this perhaps represents an implicit criticism of an Engels who sometimes lapses into formalizing generalizations about purportedly universal “laws of dialectics.” Nonetheless, this Lenin of 1914 does not, for all that, abandon the science-informed naturalism of Engelsian dialectical materialism (and, behind that, Hegelian *Naturphilosophie*). Although he turns Hegel's anti-Schellingian denunciations of pseudo-mathematical formalisms in the Philosophy of Nature against him,<sup>88</sup> Lenin, like Hegel, denounces only abstractly formalized *Naturphilosophie*, not *Naturphilosophie tout court*.

*Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* recurrently insists, in a good naturalist-materialist manner, that the human central nervous system is the highly organized matter forming the necessary natural basis for consciousness, mindedness, etc.<sup>89</sup> This 1908 insistence subsequently is echoed in 1914 by a proposed inversion of what Lenin takes Hegel's views to be—“Should be inverted: concepts are the highest product of the brain, the highest product of matter.”<sup>90</sup> I will put aside questions

.....  
83 Ibid p. 158

84 Ibid p. 174, 186

85 Ibid p. 233

86 Ibid. p. 232

87 Ibid p. 229

88 Ibid p. 183

89 Lenin 1972, p. 38-39, 43, 50-51, 61, 95, 238, 269-270

90 Lenin 1976, p. 167

regarding the accuracy of Lenin's construal of Hegel here. That said, Lenin, in both 1908 and 1914, avoids lapsing into crudely reductive materialism by adding to his neurobiological naturalism (as per his emphasis on the centrality of the central nervous system) what amounts to a greater emphasis on the dialectics of real abstractions. How so?

At one point, the *Philosophical Notebooks* sharply contrast Kantian and Hegelian abstractions in favor of the latter.<sup>91</sup> Soon after, Lenin remarks in relation to Hegel's introductory framing of the *Science of Logic*:

Is not the thought here that semblance also is objective, for it contains *one of the aspects* of the *objective* world? Not only *Wesen*, but *Schein*, too, is objective. There is a difference between the subjective and the objective, BUT IT, TOO, HAS ITS LIMITS.<sup>92</sup>

A subsequent passage from the *Philosophical Notebooks* reinforces this:

The thought of the ideal passing into the real is *profound*: very important for history. But also in the personal life of man it is clear that this contains much truth. Against vulgar materialism. NB. The difference of the ideal from the material is also not unconditional, not *überschwenglich*.<sup>93</sup>

Through implicit recourse to the Hegelian-Schellingian dialectical-speculative motif of the identity of identity and difference,<sup>94</sup> Lenin identifies nature as precisely the substantial identity between the different dimensions of, on the one hand, ideal subjectivity (*als Schein*) as “abstract,” “phenomenon,” and “moment,” and, on the other hand, real objectivity (*als Wesen*) as “concrete,” “essence,” and “relation.”<sup>95</sup> Very much in line with Hegel's interrelated substance-also-as-subject thesis and his *Naturphilosophie*, the *Philosophical Notebooks* posits a substantial natural being that sunders itself into itself as objective nature and its intimate other as subjective more-than-nature. Further—this would be Lenin's dialectics of real abstractions to which I referred a moment ago—Lenin hypothesizes that substance-generated subjects can and do really react back upon their generative substance. As per

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91 Ibid., pg. 92

92 Ibid., pg. 98

93 Ibid., pg. 114

94 Ibid, p. 184

95 Ibid., p. 208

“vulgar materialism,” appearances are mere appearances, with a one-way trajectory of causality running from a material real to an epiphenomenal ideal. As per dialectical materialism, by contrast, appearances are themselves actual beings too, with a two-way dynamic of reciprocal influences flowing back-and-forth between objective realities and subjective idealities. For instance, brain-mind relations, by the lights of Lenin’s dialectical materialism, are such that, although the mind (as ideal subject) has as a necessary condition for its very existence the being of the brain (as real object), the former can and does affect and shape the latter.

Thanks to 1914’s immersion in the work of Hegel, dialectical themes and notions obviously are quite prominent in Lenin’s notes on the *Science of Logic*.<sup>96</sup> However, these themes and notions hardly are new. Prior to the *Philosophical Notebooks, Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*: One, opposes “vulgar materialism” in the name of properly dialectical materialism<sup>97</sup>; Two, insists on the irreducible, full-fledged ontological status of the ideal as well as the real<sup>98</sup>; And, three, advocates dialecticizing the natural sciences, rather than trusting them to their own non-dialectical devices.<sup>99</sup> Lenin’s materialism in 1908 already is dialectical (as is Engels’s in, for example, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*,<sup>100</sup> from which Lenin draws so much inspiration). Lenin’s dialectic in 1914 still is materialist. Although materialism is to the fore in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and dialectic to the fore in the *Philosophical Notebooks*, this amounts to a difference of emphasis rather than a shift of position. Before, during, and after both 1908 and 1914, Lenin remains an Engels-inspired dialectical materialist.

No fundamental rupture, including a sharp break with Engelsian *Naturdialektik*, is inaugurated by the *Philosophical Notebooks*. The thesis of a 1914 *volte face*, popular amongst Western Marxists, does not hold water. If the contrasting Eastern/Soviet thesis, according to which Lenin’s dialectical materialism equals *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* plus the *Philosophical Notebooks*, needs correcting, its flaw is that it risks misleadingly suggesting that there is no dialectics in the first work and no materialism in the second work. Of course, this (perhaps inadvertent)

96 Graham 1972, pp. 48-49

97 Lenin 1972, pp. 40-41, 285-286, 288-289, 291, 277-278

98 Ibid, pp. 238, 290, 292-293, 393-394

99 Ibid., p. 372

100 Engels 1941 pp. 25-27, 48-50; Wetter 1958, p. 300; Jordan 1967, p. 160

suggestion sets the stage for and plays into the hands of Dunayevskaya and company, whose disparagement of Lenin’s 1908 materialism and celebration of Lenin’s 1914 dialectics leads to a “dialectical materialism” materialist in name only, being really devoid of any traces of materialism (as itself involving both naturalism and realism).

At this juncture, I succinctly can address as a pair two of Lenin’s post-1914 texts, namely, 1915’s “On the Question of Dialectics” and 1922’s “On the Significance of Militant Materialism.” The first of these essays contains audible echoes of the *Philosophical Notebooks*, coming only a year after the latter. In 1915, Lenin continues both: one, to stress the ubiquity of dialectics (*qua* struggles between opposites<sup>101</sup>) in an inherently, objectively dialectical nature-in-itself as well as in and between human beings<sup>102</sup>; and, two, to advance a dialectics giving pride of place to “leaps” (*à la* Hegel’s dialectics of quantity and quality<sup>103</sup>) and discord over gradualness and harmony.<sup>104</sup>

Along related lines, “On the Question of Dialectics” attributes the materialist universalization of Hegelian dialectics to Marx himself, claiming that, “with Marx the dialectics of bourgeois society is only a particular case of dialectics.”<sup>105</sup> Of course, this is tantamount, in line with Plekhanov, to crediting Marx, apart from Engels, with forging a dialectical materialism (implicitly including a potential *Naturdialektik*) as the general theory of which historical materialism, as deployed in the capitalist-era critique of political economy, is a special instance or application<sup>106</sup> (in “On the Significance of Militant Materialism” Lenin hints again at this same crediting<sup>107</sup>). Lastly, Lenin, in this 1915 piece, declares that, “Philosophical idealism is *only* nonsense from the standpoint of crude, simple, metaphysical materialism.”<sup>108</sup> Essentially, this amounts to a reminder of the central thrust of the first of Marx’s eleven “Theses on Feuerbach,” with Thesis One’s distinction between contemplative (as ahistorical, crude, eliminative, mechanical, metaphysical, reductive, simple, vulgar, etc.) and non-contemplative (i.e., historical and/or

101 Lenin 1976, p. 222; Wetter 158, p. 120; Graham 1972, p. 58-59

102 Lenin 1976, p. 357-358, 360

103 Lenin 1976, p. 123

104 Ibid., pp. 358, 360

105 Ibid., p. 359

106 Jordan 1967, pp. 359, 370

107 Lenin 1971, p. 665

108 Lenin 1976, p. 361

dialectical) materialisms.<sup>109</sup> Both Marx and Lenin lambast contemplative materialisms without, for all that, ultimately endorsing those idealisms contesting such flawed, limited materialisms. Although these idealisms' basic resistance is correct, these idealisms themselves are not. Put in Lenin's own phrasing, when it comes to idealism or contemplative materialism, "Both are worse!"

1922's "On the Significance of Militant Materialism," one of Lenin's final pronouncement on matters philosophical, seems further to vindicate my preceding assertions about a consistent dialectical materialist stance running from *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* through the *Philosophical Notebooks* and beyond (indeed, up through the last years of Lenin's life). As in both *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and 1913's "The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism," the Lenin of 1922 once again invokes the conflict between science and religion, with the Engelsian-Plekhanovite motif of the perennial war between the "two camps" of materialism and idealism palpable in the background. For this Lenin still, staunch materialism necessarily entails "militant atheism."<sup>110</sup>

Moreover, "On the Significance of Militant Materialism" manifestly returns to the main topic of central concern to the Lenin of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* specifically: the rapport between the natural sciences and philosophy, especially cases in which scientific crises and upheavals are exploitatively capitalized on by idealisms in their perpetual campaigns against materialisms. As in 1908, so too in 1922: Lenin warns that rapid advances in and radical transformations of the natural sciences threaten to inspire idealist philosophical efforts to undermine materialist views, including the spontaneous materialism of practicing natural scientists themselves.<sup>111</sup> On the later Lenin's evaluation, both science and materialism need philosophical support in order to stand up to and fend off reactionary idealist/spiritualist misappropriations of scientific revolutions.<sup>112</sup> Lenin associates the militant materialism providing this vital support "under the banner of Marxism" (as per the title of the journal, *Pod Znamenem Marksizma*, whose intellectual and ideological mission is being addressed in "On the Significance of Militant Materialism") with a "Society of Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics."<sup>113</sup> But, again, instead of 1908's materialism or 1914's

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109 Johnston 2018

110 Lenin 1971, pp. 661-662; Joravsky 1961, p. 36

111 Lenin 1971, p. 664-666; Wetter 1958, p. 256; Sheehan 1993, pp. 120-122, 132-135, 137

112 Lenin 1971, pp. 664-666

113 Lenin 1971, pp. 660-662, 665

dialectics, Leninism, in 1908, 1914, and 1922, sticks to dialectics and/with materialism, no more, no less.

I come now to the tragic figure of Bukharin. In particular, my concern will be with him at the very height of his tragedy, namely, with his *Philosophical Arabesques*, a 1937 text written in a prison cell by an already-condemned man awaiting execution. Bukharin, writing to his wife Anna Larina, says about *Philosophical Arabesques* that, "The most important thing is that the philosophical work not be lost. I worked on it for a long time and put a great deal into it; it is a very mature work in comparison to my earlier writings, and, in contrast to them, dialectical from beginning to end."<sup>114</sup>

The self-assessment contained in Bukharin's just-quoted remarks about *Philosophical Arabesques* arguably is quite accurate. Specifically, his prior theoretical *magnum opus*, 1921's *Historical Materialism*, indeed is far from thoroughly dialectical. In fact, this earlier work presents a rather non-dialectical codification of historical materialism bringing the Bukharin of this period into association with a "mechanist" faction of Soviet philosophy opposed to Abram Moiseyevich Deborin and his followers (the Deborinites championing their version of Hegel as the key to all the philosophical issues of concern in the Soviet context of the 1920s).<sup>115</sup> In relation to the mechanist-Deborinite split—varying accounts of this split can be found in, for instance, Wetter's *Dialectical Materialism*, Joravsky's *Soviet Marxism and Natural Science*, Jordan's *The Evolution of Dialectical Materialism*, and Sheehan's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science*—Bukharin's *Historical Materialism* indeed puts forward a mechanistic rendition of Marxist materialism as a thoroughgoing determinism of iron laws of causality completely governing non-human nature and human social history alike.<sup>116</sup>

The Bukharin of 1937's *Philosophical Arabesques* clearly is a thinker of significantly greater dialectical finesse than the 1920s fellow traveller of the anti-Deborinite mechanists. Although I reject dividing the earlier (*circa* 1908) from the later (*circa* 1914) Lenin, I affirm just such a division between the earlier (*circa* 1921) and the later (*circa* 1937) Bukharin. My treatment of *Philosophical Arabesques* first will highlight the continuities between Lenin's dialectical materialism and Bukharin's final theoretical positions. I then will underscore the conceptual innovations introduced by Bukharin on the eve of his execution.

To begin with the topic of realist materialism (i.e., the top priority

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114 Bukharin 2005, p. 17

115 Wetter 1958, pp. 142, 175

116 Bukharin 1969, pp. 19-52, 229

of Lenin in 1908), *Philosophical Arabesques* emphasizes multiple times that life, sentience, and sapience are all later emergent phenomena preceded by an already-long-existent Real of inorganic, non-conscious *Natur an sich*.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, the naturalist dimension of Leninist dialectical materialism shines through in Bukharin's prison treatise. Lenin's anti-idealist, neurobiological emphasis on the brain as the material seat of subjectivity (albeit subjectivity as dependent on but different from the highly organized matter of the central nervous system) is echoed by *Philosophical Arabesques*.<sup>118</sup>

Moreover, Bukharin observes, apropos the difference between subjectivity and objectivity, that, "This opposition to *réalité* arose historically when nature created and singled out from itself a new quality, the human being, the subject, the historico-social subject."<sup>119</sup> In other words, natural history immanently generates out of itself, in a dialectical dynamic involving the Hegelian logic of quantity and quality, the distinction between objective nature and subjective history/society<sup>120</sup> (one of Bukharin's descriptions of this process even audibly anticipates contemporary talk about the "anthropocene," with Bukharin speaking of "the 'anthropozoic period' of the planet earth"<sup>121</sup>). Bukharin's natural substance, like that of Hegel, Marx, and Engels, is self-sundering as partially auto-denaturalizing. I say "partially" here because Bukharin, in line with Engelsian-Leninist (qualified) naturalism, is careful to stipulate that socio-historical mediations, although profoundly transforming human nature and humanity's relations with non-human nature, never bring about total denaturalization *qua* exhaustive liquidation of anything and everything natural.<sup>122</sup>

In a chapter of *Philosophical Arabesques* devoted to the topic of "Teleology," Bukharin provides additional clarifications in connection with what I just underlined. He states therein:

In humanity, nature undergoes a bifurcation; the subject, which has arisen historically, stands counterposed to the object. The object is transformed into matter, into the object of knowledge and of practical mastering. A human being, however, represents a contradiction, a dialectical contradiction; he or she is at one

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117 Bukharin 2005, pp. 48, 60, 135, 241-243, 245

118 Ibid., pp. 140, 143

119 Ibid., p. 59

120 Ibid., p. 143

121 Ibid., p. 244

122 Ibid., p. 101

and the same time both an 'anti-member'... that is, a subject counterposed to nature, and a part of this nature, incapable of being torn out of this universal,

all-natural, dialectical relationship. When Hegel introduced his trinomial division into mechanism, 'chemism,' and teleology, he in essence used idealist language to formulate (that is, if we read him materialistically, as Lenin advised) the historical stages of development, of real development.<sup>123</sup>

Bukharin ends in this passage with a qualified endorsement of the fundamental categories (i.e., "mechanism, 'chemism,' and teleology") of Hegel's strong-emergentist *Naturphilosophie* construed as stages of natural history, of a nature exhibiting a historical series of categorial emergences.<sup>124</sup> Putting aside for the moment Bukharin's relations with Hegel and Lenin's (quasi-)Hegelianism—I will address these shortly—the rest of the above quotation essentially suggests a dialectical convergence of identities and differences between the natural and the human. On the next page of the same chapter of *Philosophical Arabesques*, Bukharin adds:

Dialectical materialism does not treat human beings as machines; it does not deny special qualities, does not deny goals, just as it does not deny reason. But dialectical materialism views these special qualities as a link in the chain of natural necessity; it views human beings in their contradictory duality as antagonists of nature and as part of nature, as both subject and object, while viewing the specific teleological principle as an aspect of the principle of necessity.<sup>125</sup>

As evidence elsewhere in this 1937 manuscript corroborates,<sup>126</sup> Bukharin's invocations of "necessity" here are of a piece with an endorsement of Engels's purportedly Hegelian compatibilism<sup>127</sup> according to which, as Bukharin himself puts it (in connection with an appeal to

.....  
123 Ibid., p. 184

124 Thao 1986, p. 138

125 Bukharin 2005, p. 185

126 Ibid., p. 116-117

127 Engels 1959, pp. 157, 390-393

Francis Bacon's *New Organon*<sup>128</sup>), "Freedom is cognized necessity."<sup>129</sup> Plekhanov too, before Bukharin, already reaffirms this same Engelsian compatibilism<sup>130</sup> (I have critiqued this Engels on properly Hegelian grounds elsewhere<sup>131</sup>). Additionally, Bukharin's "principle of necessity" arguably resonates specifically with the theme of causal lawfulness so central to his earlier, 1920s version of Marxist materialism.

In addition to repeating Engels's pseudo-Hegelian compatibilism, Bukharin also repeats a somewhat serious mistake made by Engels. The latter at one point regrettably equates materialism with nominalism<sup>132</sup> (thereby regressing to a Hobbesian ontology—a couple pages later in the same text, Engels refers to the British empiricists Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke as inspirations for the eighteenth-century French materialism itself in turn inspiring Marx and himself too<sup>133</sup>). *Philosophical Arabesques* likewise mentions a connection between Marxism and nominalism.<sup>134</sup>

However, Bukharin, fortunately but inconsistently, also upholds the anti-nominalist doctrine of real abstractions advanced by both Marx and Lenin. Two echoes of Lenin's version of this doctrine can be heard in his 1937 text: one, "theory is also a force when it seizes hold of the masses"<sup>135</sup>; and, two, "the subjective cannot be treated as merely subjective."<sup>136</sup> These two statements can be rephrased respectively as follows: One, the ideality of conceptual abstractions are non-epiphenomenal *qua* causally efficacious in reality; Two, the realm of the ideal is not simply unreal. For a nominalist ontology, the only true existents are the perceptible immediacies of concrete spatio-temporal particulars as irreducibly unique "x"s, as absolutely individuated singularities; any categorial and conceptual generalities over and above such "x"s are dismissed as mere names, as inefficacious, sterile linguistic constructs and conventions lacking any real ontological status or weight. For dialectical materialism (as well as transcendental

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128 Bukharin 2005, p. 117

129 Ibid., p. 116

130 (Plekhanov 1974, pp. 476-477; Plekhanov 1969, pp. 90-92; Plekhanov 1969, pp. 143-144, 146

131 Johnston 2017

132 Engels 1975, p. 10

133 Ibid., p. 12

134 Bukharin 2005, p. 87

135 Bukharin 2005, p. 37

136 Ibid., p. 74

materialism<sup>137</sup>), categorial and conceptual generalities are far from epiphenomenal, instead being endowed with actual causal efficacy *vis-à-vis* nominalism's particulars.

Picking back up the thread of the continuities between Lenin's dialectical materialism and the late Bukharin, several more links between these two Bolsheviks surface in *Philosophical Arabesques*. In line with the Engelsian-Plekhanovite-Leninist motif of the recurrent struggles between religious idealism and atheistic materialism, Bukharin speaks of sweeping away religion and its "dualist fetters."<sup>138</sup> He also endorses Lenin's account according to which: First, dialectical materialism is the general theory behind Marx's historical materialism as an application of this theory to social formations<sup>139</sup>; and, second, Marx's dialectical materialism is itself a synthesis of mechanistic materialism (from the Greek atomists, through the French materialists, and up to Feuerbach) with dialectical idealism (as embodied by Hegelian philosophy)<sup>140</sup> (with the Lukács of 1954's *The Destruction of Reason* echoing this rendition of Marx's dialectical materialism<sup>141</sup>).

I turn now to observing briefly the overlaps between Lenin and Bukharin specifically apropos Hegel. An appreciation of Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* is largely responsible for Bukharin's belated conversion from a more mechanistic to a more dialectical materialism.<sup>142</sup> Accordingly, endorsements and reiterations of this Lenin (and, implicitly behind him, Plekhanov) abound throughout *Philosophical Arabesques*: The realist-objective (i.e., anti-subjectivist) side of Hegelian absolute idealism places it in close proximity to materialism<sup>143</sup>; The speculative dialectics of absolute idealism must be taken as ontological and not merely epistemological<sup>144</sup>; Various aspects of Hegel's corpus distinguish him as a proto-historical-materialist<sup>145</sup>; And, in line with a long-standing tradition amongst Russian Hegelians and Marxists, there is celebration of the dialectical dynamics of quantities and qualities, with their "leaps," as

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137 Johnston 2014a, pp. 57-61, 65-66, 73-78, 85, 96-97, 100-102, 123-124

138 Bukharin 2005, pp. 220-221

139 Ibid., p. 337

140 Ibid., p. 328

141 Lukács 1981, p. 196

142 Bukharin 2005, pp. 325, 372

143 Ibid., pp. 57, 261, 304

144 Ibid., pp. 308-309

145 Ibid., pp. 114-116

crystallizing “the algebra of revolution” (Herzen).<sup>146</sup>

But, what, if any, are the novel contributions made to the tradition of dialectical materialism by *Philosophical Arabesques*? I discern several in this text. To begin with, Bukharin tempers the apparent ahistoricism of Engels’s laws of *Naturdialektik* by stipulating that these laws are historical, albeit on the longer time-scale of natural history.<sup>147</sup> Hence, these laws seem ahistorical only relative to the comparatively shorter time-scales of human history.

Bukharin also addresses Hegel’s *Naturphilosophie* directly. He faults Hegel for allegedly having regressed back behind Kant into a pre-modern vision of nature as ahistorical (i.e., eternal, unchanging, static, etc.).<sup>148</sup> Bukharin charges that, in Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature, idealism (as conservative and reactionary) sadly wins out over dialectics (as progressive and revolutionary).<sup>149</sup> Although I fundamentally disagree with Bukharin’s characterization of Hegelian *Naturphilosophie*,<sup>150</sup> Bukharin admittedly is right to suggest that ongoing scientific developments from Hegel’s time onward demand revising and reworking multiple components of Hegel’s original Philosophy of Nature. Indeed, I agree that transforming *Naturphilosophie* in response to the sciences is an important process of recurrent theoretical labor for dialectical materialism. But, Bukharin is wrong to suggest that Hegel himself would be unready, unwilling, and/or unable to carry out such transformations were he to be confronted with these scientific developments.

Apropos the natural sciences, *Philosophical Arabesques* makes a couple of points worth noting. First of all, Bukharin denounces as “stupid, obtuse, and narrow-minded” the gesture of reducing the sciences to being social constructions through and through.<sup>151</sup> Of course, there are plenty of non-Marxist permutations of this maneuver. However, he understandably is concerned with its Marxist variants, according to which, on the basis of an economistic assumption about one-way determination of superstructure by infrastructure, the sciences are superstructural outgrowths of the economic base. Therefore, they are peculiar to given social formations and, moreover, likely entangled with the ideologies permeating superstructural phenomena. Precisely as

.....  
146 Ibid., p. 348

147 Ibid., p. 60

148 Ibid., pp. 134-135

149 Ibid., pp. 134-135

150 Johnston 2014b, pp. 204-237; Johnston 2018.

151 Bukharin 2005, pp. 217-218

a materialist, Bukharin cannot stomach the anti-naturalism and anti-realism of such a pseudo-Marxist philosophy of science.

Also apropos the empirical, experimental sciences of nature, *Philosophical Arabesques* ventures a tentative prediction about further development to come. Bukharin muses:

...in the future a whole series of solid conquests of science will be taken in different connections, considered from different points of view, once these points of view have been developed; it is absurd to think that in millions of years thought will be the same as it is now. But a great deal of today’s science will remain alive, as solid, eternal, and absolute acquisitions.<sup>152</sup>

The crucial upshot of Bukharin’s reflections here is that one can acknowledge the shifting claims and findings of the sciences without, for all that, succumbing to an anti-realist skepticism about the entirety of their contents past and present. That is to say, just because the sciences have changed and will change does not mean that each and every determinate result put forward by them is doomed to total nullification sooner or later in the future. For Bukharin, dialectical materialism proper must shun such anti-naturalist epistemological pessimism as speciously justifying deliberate neglect of the sciences.

Finally, *Philosophical Arabesques* contains an important warning about the abuses of dialectics, a warning with which Hegel would agree<sup>153</sup> (even if Bukharin is unaware of this agreement). Bukharin cautions that dialectics cannot and should not carelessly be generalized into an unqualified “theory of everything,” namely, a circumscribed set of universal laws equally applicable to even the smallest, most commonplace things under the sun (he gives as examples of the latter buttons, knives, forks, and steel ingots, ridiculing the notion of a “dialectic of buttons,” for instance).<sup>154</sup> Bukharin’s essential point is that dialectics, accurately understood, does not dialecticize everything without reserve or remainder. In other words, dialectics itself recognizes differences between the dialectical and the non-dialectical, admitting the existence of the latter (for Hegel, such non-dialectical dimensions as *Verstand* and mechanical physics indeed are realities to be recognized as such<sup>155</sup>). The Bukharin of 1937 ought to be recognized as perspicuously

.....  
152 Ibid., p. 281

153 Johnston 2017.

154 Bukharin 2005, p. 337

155 Johnston 2017

discerning the need for a (meta-)dialectical balancing between the dialectical and the non-dialectical.

Immediately on the heels of *Philosophical Arabesques*, Stalin publishes in 1938, just months after having executed Bukharin, his codification of Marxist philosophy. Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, articulating his *diamat*, promptly is imposed as official doctrine within the Soviet spheres of Really Existing Socialism. Just as Stalin's liquidation of Bukharin is one of the incarnations of a terrifying political Thermidor, so too is the succession of *Philosophical Arabesques* by *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* a manifestation of a philosophical Thermidor.

As is well known, Stalin eliminates Engels's dialectical law of the negation of the negation. Of course, this specific elimination is a theoretical symptom of the practical fact of the entrenchment of the Stalinist bureaucratic state apparatus (with this dictatorship, as a [post-] revolutionary "negation" of the tsarist state, refusing to contemplate the possibility of itself being "negated" in turn by further revolutionary developments).<sup>156</sup> Stalin, in his last major philosophical statement (on the topic of language and linguistics) from the start of the 1950s, similarly adds caveats to the Hegelian-Engelsian dialectics of quantity and quality. Implicitly at odds with Lenin's (and Bukharin's) emphatic Bolshevik celebrations of the "leaps" of Hegel's speculative-logical "algebra of revolution," Stalin argues against cumulative quantitative changes always sooner or later catalyzing leap-like "explosions." More specifically, he suggests that, in terms of social transformations in classless societies (with the Soviet Union *circa* 1950 largely having achieved, according to Stalinist propaganda, the dissolution of classes), the continuity of evolutions rather than the discontinuity of revolutions will be the rule.<sup>157</sup> Once again, the message is clear: There will be no future explosive revolutionary negations of the *status quo* in the U.S.S.R.; Stalinism is here to stay.

However, as per the cliché "even a broken clock is right at least twice a day," Stalin's rendition of Marxist materialism is not entirely without its (admittedly unoriginal) merits *qua* select concurrences with the prior philosophical efforts of Engels, Plekhanov, and Lenin. To begin with, Stalin's 1924 lectures on *The Foundations of Leninism* stress the importance of theory (against anti-intellectualism, spontaneism, and the like) and, in connection with this, indicate that theoretical concepts can and do function as real abstractions by galvanizing and guiding mass-

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<sup>156</sup> Wetter 1958, p. 311

<sup>157</sup> Stalin 1972, p. 27

scale socio-political projects (as practices, movements, revolutions, etc.).<sup>158</sup> 1938's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* likewise implicitly relies at points on the notion of real abstractions.<sup>159</sup> Other features of *diamat* also echo the dialectical materialism of Stalin's predecessors as discussed by me in the preceding: Both natural and human histories indeed are punctuated by sudden revolutions in addition to gradual evolutions<sup>160</sup>; The matter of *Natur* exists prior to and independently of the *Geist* of humanity<sup>161</sup>; Marxism, with its materialism (especially as carried forward by Engels and the Lenin of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*), involves a Hegel-inspired scientific realism<sup>162</sup>; And, against mechanistic economism and related deviations, superstructures react back upon infrastructures<sup>163</sup> (an anti-deterministic thesis central to Western Marxists from Lukács and Antonio Gramsci onward). Evidently, Stalin even resisted Trofim Denisovich Lysenko's attempted tethering of sciences to classes, rebutting that mathematics and Darwinism, in their scientific universality, are independent of class bases<sup>164</sup> (a point likewise central to Stalin's later rebuking of linguist Nicolai Marr's thesis that languages are components of specific social superstructures<sup>165</sup>).

Yet, even these philosophical virtues borrowed by Stalin from his Marxist predecessors manage to be perverted by him into political vices. In particular, the theories of real abstractions and the downward causation of superstructure *vis-à-vis* infrastructure are pressed into the service of rationalizing a voluntarism, one in tension with core aspects of historical materialism, of top-down governance by the enlightened consciousnesses of the Party and its Leader.<sup>166</sup> In general, Stalinist *diamat* somehow manages the lamentable feat of a non-dialectical, contradictory sandwiching together of a teleological determinism (as per the combined laws of nature and history inexorably progressing toward specific ends) with a spiritualistic voluntarism (as per exceptional individuals, "great men," playing guiding roles in various processes). I

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<sup>158</sup> Stalin, *The Foundations of Leninism*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975, pp. 19-23

<sup>159</sup> Stalin 1940, pp. 22-23, 43-44

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9, 11-13

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16, 20

<sup>162</sup> Stalin 1975, pp. 20-21; Stalin 1940, p. 17

<sup>163</sup> Stalin 1940, pp. 22-23, 43-44

<sup>164</sup> Pollock 2006, pp. 56-57, 59, 134

<sup>165</sup> Stalin 1972, pp. 5-9, 25; Stalin 1972, pp. 33-35; Pollock 2006, pp. 104-135

<sup>166</sup> Wetter 1958, pp. 216-217, 219-220

neither pretend nor would be inclined to try to sort out the muddle of conflicting theoretical elements forced together under the ferocious pressure of Stalin's unprincipled political opportunism.

As I noted a short while ago, the deletion of the negation of the negation and the limitation of the dialectics of quantity and quality are two hallmark philosophical features of the Stalinist Thermidor. Two other such features, the first of which I refer to immediately above, surface in *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*: one, the necessary, inevitable progress of natural and social developments over the course of historical time in an inexorable "onward and upward movement"<sup>167</sup>; two, the association of dialectics with a perspective according to which, starting with nature-in-itself, material realities are envisioned as continuously evolving organic wholes of thoroughly interconnected parts.<sup>168</sup> The Stalinist (per)version of dialectical materialism promotes the necessities of strong Nature and strong History as, taken together, a teleological big Other or One-All (to resort to a hybrid of Lacanian and Badiouian phrasings). By sharp contrast, transcendental materialism puts forward the contingencies of weak nature and weak history as, taken together, an aleatory barred Other or not-One/non-All. This difference comes down to that between totalizing organicist (w)holism and its negation.

I want at this juncture to leave Stalin behind and circumnavigate back to Marx and Lenin so as to bring the present intervention to a fitting close. Apropos Marx and Lenin, Planty-Bonjour acknowledges that both are committed to an ultimately naturalist basis for historical and/or dialectical materialism.<sup>169</sup> However, he expresses some worries and reservations about this naturalism. In his book *The Categories of Dialectical Materialism*, Planty-Bonjour remarks:

...although human activity explains the dialectical bond between man and nature, it says nothing about the origins of nature. It is too easy to say that Marx did not take the question up. Do we not find in Marx the famous text on the rejection of the idea of creation? And it is precisely there that he takes an openly naturalist position to defend and justify the ontological primacy of material being, in order to invalidate a recourse to God the creator.<sup>170</sup>

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167 Stalin 1940, pp. 8-9, 11-13

168 Ibid. pp. 7-8

169 Planty-Bonjour 1967, p. 96; Planty-Bonjour 1974, p. 288

170 Planty-Bonjour 1967, p. 96

Several things ought to be said in response to these comments. To begin with, insofar as Marxist materialism insists upon the chronological as well as ontological priority of being over thinking, it would not and could not have any intention of trying to account for the origin of nature via human *praxis*. For Marx, as both a materialist and an admirer of Charles Darwin, any attempt along these lines would be an idealist inversion of reality, since, in fact, humanity emerges from nature and not vice versa. The human and humanizing dialectics of laboring arises out of a physical, chemical, and organic nature as a relatively recent development in evolutionary history.

Furthermore, not only is there a close link between materialism and naturalism, including for Marxist materialism(s)—naturalist materialism also is intimately associated with atheism too. To state the obvious, as a materialist, one must exclude the possibility of an immaterial, transcendent cause for real existence (such as a monotheistic God). And, as a naturalist materialist, one also must exclude the possibility of humans creating nature (insisting instead upon the opposite). Hence, Marx (and those following him, such as Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin, and Bukharin) is compelled to deny that either divine or anthropomorphic agency constitutes "the origins of nature," as Planty-Bonjour puts it in the above quotation.

Planty-Bonjour's observation that Marx "says nothing" about these origins, regardless of his intentions, should not be counted as a critical point. My argument here is that Marx, aware of Engels's efforts apropos *Naturdialektik*,<sup>171</sup> assumes, like Engels, that the problem of "the origins of nature" is best left to empirical, experimental science. To usurp such *aposteriori* science through an *apriori* armchair adjudication of this problem, even if such armchair adjudication is performed by someone identified and/or self-identifying as a materialist, would be tantamount to a methodological relapse into an idealism pretending to be able to reconstruct all of reality, nature included, from within the concepts of a thinking detached from the percepts of being(s). Marx, Engels, Lenin, and their dialectical materialist fellow travelers, given their appreciation of the natural sciences and the histories of these disciplines, are well aware of the incomplete, in-progress status of scientific investigations into, among other matters, the initial, primordial genesis of *Natur überhaupt* (with this issue continuing to be far from fully resolved by today's sciences). However, dialectical materialists would rather gamble on having faith in the potential of scientific explanations for this and other puzzles than impatiently and preemptively explain things away through

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hasty recourse to the illusory dogmatic certainties of religious and other non-naturalist notions. Marx and his dialectical materialist comrades deliberately leave open the question of the origins of nature precisely because, as materialists, they understand it as primarily the jurisdiction of sciences, sciences for which the genesis of the physical universe (or universes) indeed remains an open question.<sup>172</sup>

Planty-Bonjour's study of Russian Hegelianism up to and including Lenin's readings of Hegel similarly voices misgivings about the naturalism of Leninist dialectical materialism. Planty-Bonjour recognizes that, "For Lenin, the first foundation is the becoming of nature."<sup>173</sup> Not long after this acknowledgement, he characterizes Lenin's Hegel-inspired positing of an anthropogenetic gradual "detachment from nature" as "audacious" for a materialist, insinuating that this audacity might represent a backsliding into outright idealism.<sup>174</sup> Planty-Bonjour's reaction can be rephrased as a question: How, if at all, can one formulate a thoroughly materialist account of the immanent natural emergence of (self-)denaturalizing human beings out of pre/non-human nature? Of course, this is a key, defining question for transcendental materialism with its dialectical naturalism.

Planty-Bonjour evidently assumes that Hegel's manner of asking and answering this query is thoroughly idealist *qua* anti-realist and anti-materialist (an assumption I attempt to demolish elsewhere<sup>175</sup>). Additionally, Planty-Bonjour's perplexed response to Lenin's invocation of a real-dialectical liberation from nature—more precisely, this would be the self-liberation of (a part of) nature, namely, nature's auto-denaturalization in and through the activities of minded and like-minded organisms of a peculiar type—is quite strange given the former's knowledge of the history of dialectical materialism. One of the red threads of Hegelian origins running through the materialist musings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Bukharin, and various others is the conception according to which *praxis*, as human laboring broadly construed, indeed involves a nature-catalyzed and nature-immanent "detachment from nature."

But, perhaps Planty-Bonjour's critical point is that traditional dialectical materialism fails to elaborate a satisfactorily detailed account of pre/non-human nature at the level of a sort of *Naturphilosophie*

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172 Johnston 2014b, pp. 222-224

173 Planty-Bonjour 1974, p. 288

174 Ibid., p. 310

175 Johnston 2017 & 2018

providing a required but missing theoretical foundation for both dialectical and historical materialism. If this in fact is his claim, I am partially sympathetic to it. Less sympathetically, I try to show on another occasion that various Marxist figures, especially when appropriately situated *vis-à-vis* a certain Hegel, already furnish much of what is requisite for such a general theory of nature.<sup>176</sup> More sympathetically, I admittedly have to engage, on this other occasion, in a great deal of exegetically charitable reconstruction work in order to extract and (re) assemble a cohesive model of *Natur an sich* from the texts of Marx and friends.<sup>177</sup> I also might be in agreement with Planty-Bonjour in judging that Marxist materialists (such as Engels and Lenin at certain moments and Stalin unwaveringly) sometimes have recourse to an image of nature as a "strong" totality *qua* deterministic and lawful organic whole—an image of nature in relation to which, as per Planty-Bonjour's criticism, it truly is difficult to conceive of any actual real "detachment" in monistic-materialist (rather than dualistic-idealist) terms.

Transcendental materialism's main philosophical contribution to the tradition of dialectical materialism is nothing other than its idea of "weak nature" at stake across the entire arc of the second volume of my *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism*. This idea, I maintain, uniquely enables the formulation of what Planty-Bonjour worries Lenin wants but cannot have: a nature-based materialism allowing and accounting for "detachment from nature." In this respect, I leave it open whether transcendental materialism, with its dialectical naturalism, amounts to positing the presuppositions of dialectical materialism or represents a movement of surpassing it. Maybe, considering Hegel's *Aufhebung*, this is a false dilemma.

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177 Ibid.

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