

SHRAPNELS: JACQUES DERRIDA'S *THEORY AND PRACTICE*: TOWARDS AN ENIGMATIC MATERIALISM OF HOPE

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Jacques Derrida's lectures on Theory and Practice leave a lot to be desired from the perspective of historical materialism. Yet, one can nonetheless find in them the germ of a genuine understanding of materialism. More specifically, following the systematic use of the word "enigma" in the text, I show that this term serves as the heuristic device for articulating an originally Derridean materialism, one which I name "enigmatic materialism," and which, I argue, is genuinely collective, insofar as it opposes any form of monism. Moreover, this materialism has profound repercussions for the concept of hope developed in these lectures. Hope, from the perspective of an "enigmatic materialist," becomes a collective endeavour that avoids the pitfalls of solipsistic individualism through the joint effort of the subject and its/the Other.

Les cours de Jacques Derrida sur Théorie et pratique laissent beaucoup à désirer du point de vue du matérialisme historique. Cependant, on peut y trouver les germes d'une véritable compréhension du matérialisme. Plus précisément, à la suite de l'utilisation systématique du mot « énigme » dans le texte, je montre que ce terme sert de dispositif heuristique pour articuler un matérialisme originellement derridien, que je nomme « matérialisme énigmatique », et qui, selon moi, est véritablement collectif dans la mesure où il s'oppose à toute forme de monisme. De plus, ce matérialisme a de profondes répercussions sur le concept d'espérance développé dans ces conférences. Dans cette perspective « matérialiste énigmatique », l'espoir devient une entreprise collective qui n'est pas la projection de l'individu solipsiste mais l'effort conjoint du sujet et de son/de l'Autre.

Introduction

The (online) *Oxford English Dictionary* defines shrapnel as “A hollow projectile containing bullets and a small bursting charge, which, when fired by a time fuse, bursts the shell and scatters the contents in a shower; (also) such shells collectively.”¹ According to the entry’s profile, the word was first used in 1806 by Captain J. F. Ogilvie, who praises the invention of his colleague, Henry Shrapnel, an artillery officer in the British army. What was originally called “spherical case shot” by its creator was submitted to the Board of Ordnance, the body responsible to supply with munition and equipment both the British Army and the Navy, in 1799 and approved in 1803. However, it was only after being eponymized as “Shrapnel shell” in June of 1852 that it became famous and established itself—together with another eponym, “the Congreve rocket”—as “an ingenious instrument of wholesale murder.”² Nevertheless, even this use of the word has been subsequently rendered parochial. When referring to a shrapnel nowadays, we normally do it in the compound form of a “shrapnel shell” to connote “fragments from shells or bombs” or “small fragments of anything, esp. pieces of metal, resulting from an impact or explosion.”³

From the etymological development of these three terms—“spherical case shot,” “Shrapnel shell,” and “shrapnel shell”—one can trace, via an imaginative detour into Aristotle, a certain truth of materialist philosophy. We can see, for example, that the first term, “spherical case shot,” corresponds to Aristotle’s formal cause (εἶδος), the shape that matter (ύλη) acquires and that makes it a particular and recognizable type of thing. The second term, “Shrapnel shell,” corresponds to Aristotle’s efficient “cause” (κινούν), in that it points to the agent, Lieutenant General Henry Shrapnel, who, like the sculptor Polyclitus, the Aristotelian artistic man, brought about the thing in question. And yet, it is the third denomination, that of a “shrapnel shell,” which corresponds to Aristotle’s last cause, that of end and purpose (τέλος), in that it discloses the newly found weapon’s lethal functionality for which “shrapnel” would find its entrance in the history books and our cultural imagination. Hence, neither the meticulous, formal description of the characteristics of an anti-personnel war-machine “that consists of a case provided with a

¹ “Shrapnel, n.,” *OED Online* (updated March 2023), [<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/178797?>].

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

powder charge and a large number of usually lead balls and that is exploded in flight”⁴ nor the brilliant mastermind behind it sufficed to introduce “shrapnel” into our common-sense vocabulary. Rather, it was the small, partially invisible splinters of bullets that were fired with the sole purpose to tear bodies apart that conferred on this weapon its everlasting valence, one still in common use even after the weapon itself fell out of actual military use following the end of World War I.

Derrida’s lectures on *Theory and Practice* demonstrate a similar function in relationship to their taking up of the question of materialism.⁵ Given at the *École Normale Supérieure* in 1976–77, these lectures leave a lot to be desired from the perspective of those interested in Marxist materialism, a common observation among reviewers of the volume.⁶ Perhaps frustrated at having to carry out once again, in repetitive fashion, the task of preparing his students for the French state exam (*agrégation*)⁷ on a topic not of his choosing, these lectures appear, as DiDiodato put it, like the “promise of more edifying lectures to come”;⁸ or, as Baring quips, only “ostensibly theoretical” since an “*agrégation* seminar was,” and still is, “a place where novelty had to be contained, not unleashed.”⁹ Hence, while containing interesting material on “Derrida’s thinking on the limit, the possibility of the new, and on Heidegger,”¹⁰ for those of us—like myself—interested in Derrida’s “relationship to Marxism” or the Marxist tradition, who perhaps anticipated the arrival of these lectures as a long-awaited chance to glimpse Derrida’s Marx before the

⁴ “Shrapnel,” *Merriam-Webster.com* (updated May 28, 2023), [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shrapnel>], accessed June 2, 2023.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Theory and Practice*, (tr.) D. Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TP.

⁶ Edward Baring, review of *Theory and Practice*, by Jacques Derrida, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (Aug. 3, 2019), [<https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/theory-and-practice/>]; Rick Elmore, review of *Theory and Practice*, by Jacques Derrida, *Derrida Today*, vol. 13., no. 2 (2020): 254–61; Conrad DiDiodato, review of *Theory and Practice*, by Jacques Derrida, *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books* (Feb. 22, 2020), [https://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviews/17770_theory-and-practice-by-jacques-derrida-reviewed-by-conrad-didiodato/]; David Maruzzella, review of *Theory and Practice*, by Jacques Derrida, *The Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 43, no. 2 (2021): 316–29.

⁷ Maruzzella, review of *Theory and Practice*, 317.

⁸ DiDiodato, review of *Theory and Practice*.

⁹ Baring, review of *Theory and Practice*.

¹⁰ Elmore, review of *Theory and Practice*, 255.

Specters of Marx,¹¹ these lectures ended up being, as Elmore summarizes, “somewhat disappointing” to say the least.¹²

This disappointment notwithstanding, the power of those lectures lies neither in their form nor in their agent. Just as in the example of the “spherical case shot” or the “Shrapnel shell,” the power of these lectures lies, as is often the case with Derrida’s work, elsewhere, and more specifically, in the results that the lectures effectuate. As Thomas Clément Mercier argues in a series of articles tackling Derrida’s early lectures,¹³ we have to avoid trying to understand these lectures as coherent and refined works if we do not want to miss out on their “specificity...as seminar notes,”¹⁴ i.e., as products of a thought that “exceeds the written medium.”¹⁵ Instead, we should attend to Derrida’s lectures as examples of what Mercier calls “the orality and aurality of the teaching scene,”¹⁶ and as archival traces and memories of the institutional, biographical life of their author, while also attending to “the socio-political circumstances of such teaching (which is particularly significant when someone teaches Marx).”¹⁷ This is also how we should approach *Theory and Practice*; neither as a series of well-thought-out lectures nor as a book by Derrida. Or put differently, we should approach these lectures as shrapnel(s) from the past, splinters of a theoretical work with the power to provoke and transform, in important ways, our current understanding.

The issues I intend to focus on in the following concern two splinters developed in the opening sessions of *Theory and Practice*: the first, a new type of materialism suggested by the notion of the enigma, and building on that, a materialist understanding of hope. My argument here is not that Derrida provides us with a complete account of materialism or a thorough concept of hope. Rather, my argument is that, after reading these lectures, it is impossible to

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, (tr.) P. Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹² Elmore, review of *Theory and Practice*, 255.

¹³ Thomas Clément Mercier, “Before the *Specters*: The Memory of a Promise (from the Archives),” *Contexto Internacional: Journal of Global Connections*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2020): 1–20; Thomas Clément Mercier, “Silence, in the Archives: Derrida’s Other Marx(s),” *Aisthesis*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2020): 31–46; Thomas Clément Mercier, “Re/pro/ductions: Ça déborde,” *Poetics Today*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2021): 23–47.

¹⁴ Mercier, “Silence, in the Archives,” 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

think or work on materialism, on matters concerning a socially-constructed subjectivity, on topics within the framework of social ontology, and, last but not least, on the problematic of utopia, without coming back to what I call in these lectures Derrida's "enigmatic materialism of hope."

Defining the Enigmatic (I): Uncertainty, Unforeseeability, Performativity, Processuality

Derrida's relation to materialism has always been a tense one and has, in my view, unfolded in three rather distinctive stages. Having declared in *Positions* that "if, and in the extent to which, *matter* in this general economy designates...radical alterity...then what I write can be considered 'materialist,'" ¹⁸ Derrida establishes very early on in his work a connection to Marx and materialist philosophy, one that has become an important field of study. Moreover, this debate entered a new phase after the publication of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, and while abating somewhat in the beginning of the 2000s, it has rekindled in the 2010s with the advent of the speculative materialism and the different tendencies within new materialism and realism. These are, of course, relatively well-known facts and the literature on each of these phases is quite extensive. However, it is important to underline that throughout all three of those stages the method of critique *vis-à-vis* Derrida's supposed materialism followed a similar form: a concrete-ish type of Marxism and/or a new-ish type of materialism—whether historical, dialectical, nondialectical, speculative, or new—was often retrospectively conjectured as the only correct one and Derrida's materialism was scrutinized in order to be discarded, bent, or assimilated depending on whether or not it matched the presumed criteria and characteristics of this materialism. This led to the character of Derrida's own materialism remaining consistently underdeveloped, pictured as a sidekick of someone else's materialism. The publication of *Theory and Practice* gives us the opportunity to distance ourselves from this tactic and peruse Derrida's materialism as a unique type of materialism that, while conversing with the leading materialisms of its time, does not fail in being a materialism in its own right. And the concept of the "enigma"

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, (tr.) A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 64.

seems to be the springboard for articulating this distinctly Derridean materialism.

The word enigma appears very prominently in the opening pages of the first session of *Theory and Practice*, at a point where Derrida is still juggling with the normative and semantic perplexities of the aphoristic centrepiece of the entire course, the phrase “(It) must be done [*faut le faire*].” For Derrida, this phrase harbours a double question. On the one hand, it asks for the programmatic provision(s) according to which something must be done, and, on the other hand, it demonstrates and, most importantly, adjudicates upon what is currently being done in the lectures themselves. If the first question pertains to “theory,” then the second pertains to “practice.” Yet, both need to be defined, namely what constitutes “theory” as well as what constitutes “practice.” And this is the first moment where the word enigmatic enters the stage (see TP, 3). Enigmatic is not what “theory” or “practice” are respectively *per se*. Rather, enigmatic, *i.e.*, *uncertain*, is suggested as the explications of what “theory” and “practice” can potentially be, a notion that exposes a certain unity between “theory” and “practice” and makes them suffer under the same cognitive predicament.

The second time that the word enigma appears it seems to uphold the meaning of this uncertainty. However, this uncertainty does not refer this time to the contestable semantic content of concepts like those of theory and practice. Rather, it refers to the *unforeseeable* effects that texts, and particularly Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach,” which is Derrida’s main point of reference, can and have unravelled, especially if taken into consideration that their demiurge, Marx, had not deemed them worthy of being published (see TP, 9). If uncertainty in the case of the conceptual pair theory/practice is backward-looking, since it expresses the difficulty to pinpoint the content of a concept down to a certain genealogy, the uncertainty in the case of the “Theses on Feuerbach” is forward-looking: The word enigma brings to the fore an astoundedness and an awe that were neither intended nor could have been anticipated.

However, and directly after it was introduced in such a seemingly insignificant and incidental manner, the word enigma is bestowed its first conceptual connotation. Apart from merely denoting uncertainty in regard to the genealogical and conceptual past of “theory” and “practice” and the *unforeseeability* in regard to the results of their enactments, the word enigmatic connotes also the aetiologically linked cause behind those descriptions. Theory and practice are enigmatic, *i.e.*, inconclusive regarding their past and indeterminable concerning their future, because they are *performative*. As such they

depend upon and alter their presence according to their theoretical conceptualizations and practical realizations. As Derrida puts it, “[T]he thetic character of the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ comes to be determined only in close relation to the content of what is uttered here” (TP, 10). From this perspective, the materialism of the theory/practice dipole of the “Theses” depends neither on its theoretical content nor its practical effectiveness, which is to say, on an already established set of considerations of what is or should be considered as materialist. On the contrary, the “Theses” are materialist because they enact and perform what they declare and enunciate without being bound to a pre-existing discourse that they need to implement and realize (noting that Derrida mentions *nomos* and *physis* as two such discursive edifices). Theory and practice are, therefore, to that extent thetic or prescriptive as long as they impose themselves on their own reality, rendering the outcome of their realization both uncertain and unforeseeable and only therefore enigmatic.

This first normative conceptualization of the word enigmatic leads to a further, equally substantial, semantic content of the word, namely its *processuality*. If both the past and the future of the materialism of the “Theses” are uncertain and unforeseeable, emanating performatively through actions that happen in the here-and-now, then this cannot but presuppose a certain processuality as the temporal mode of materialism’s coming to being. Instead of being the anticipated fulfilment of something foreseeable or the (teleo-)logical and monocausal conclusion of something deductible, the word enigmatic connotes a process that is always in the making and, consequently, always shiftable. Enigma is the permanent state (and not the result) of a process that has been initiated; a process whose outcome is open; a process, finally, whose outcome depends on itself and is not dictated by what Derrida calls a “rigorous anteriority” (TP, 12f.), *i.e.*, “a mode of a theoretical reading” that has become aware of itself already in advance.

There is, however, a last characteristic of the enigma that needs to be mentioned and ties all the previous characteristics of the Enigmatic together; a characteristic that patiently awaits to be disclosed in the last session of the course and that Derrida never calls by its name. This driving characteristic and constellation—not force—that lurks behind the Enigmatic and gives the Enigmatic its enigmatic character is none other than the concept of *collectivity*. And it is collectivity that, for Derrida, does not only lie behind Marx’s critique of Feuerbach and provide the basis for Derrida’s critique of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser respectively, but also serves as the main characteristic of what I call Derrida’s enigmatic materialism.

Defining the Enigmatic (II): The Enigmatic is the Collective

Derrida structures his lectures around the following question: “[D]oes the last Thesis [on Feuerbach] mark the end of philosophy...or the end of only the philosophy that is satisfied with interpreting” (TP, 13)? The former would mean that Marx opts for “a general revolutionary practice and a revolutionary theory/practice that would no longer belong to the order of philosophy, essentially overflowing the philosophical as such” (*ibid.*, 14). The latter would entail an understanding of a “practico-revolutionary philosophy” that aims at the transformation of the world yet “without rejecting, suppressing, exceeding, destroying the philosophical” (*ibid.*) For Derrida, the answer to this question is unequivocal: Materialism—even in its dialectical guise—is a “*philosophy*,” since it operates by “interpreting-transforming history without abandoning the philosophical unity of the medium in which this history would need to be thought” (*ibid.*). Derrida turns to three critiques to corroborate this working hypothesis: Marx’s critique of Ludwig Feuerbach, Gramsci’s critique of Benedetto Croce, and Althusser’s self-critique in his “Reply to John Lewis.”¹⁹ And yet, importantly, it is collectivity that is the unvoiced heuristic device behind all three of these critiques.

Collectivity is already at play as soon as Feuerbach duplicated (and not dirempted) the world into a religious, imaginary world and a secular one. Yet, as Marx puts it, Feuerbach argues in favour of “resolving the world into its secular basis”²⁰ and therefore in favour of the world’s reunification under a solitary paradigm (secularism). For Marx, however, a different strategy should have been chosen. The world’s simultaneous existence as both religious/imaginary and secular at the same time needs firstly to be understood as a contradiction; and at a second step, as soon as this contradiction has been thoroughly realized, it needs to be changed through practice by refuting the theological fundaments that bring forward this duplication. In this light, neither theory nor practice suffice on their own. Rather, both theory and practice, collectively combined and reciprocally informed, need to be called upon in order to demystify the world from its imaginary doubleness. And Derrida mentions explicitly the conjunction “*at once, both*” (“*sowohl...als...*” in the German

¹⁹ Louis Althusser, “Reply to John Lewis,” in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, (tr.) G. Lock (London: Verso, 1990), 35–77.

²⁰ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, (ed.) R. Tucker (New York/London: Norton, 1978), 144.

original text) that underlies Marx's critique of Feuerbach in Thesis Four (see TP, 13).

A similar diagnosis is to be found also in Derrida's reading of Gramsci. For Derrida, Gramsci is right when arguing that Croce's theoretical scrutiny that results in assuming that Marx intended to replace theory with revolutionary practice does not but reconfirm and reinstate philosophy as the Archimedean centre of theoretical enquiry. However, Derrida goes a step further. In Gramsci's critique of Croce, Derrida does not just diagnose the inescapability of philosophy as Gramsci seems to do when arguing that it is logically absurd to wish to overcome philosophy. The latter would merely elevate philosophy, as in Feuerbach's case, to the sole unificatory vector that subsequently demotes practice to a secondary register. Rather, what really happens when assuming, as Gramsci does, that philosophy is the promontory, vantage point, or edge (Derrida calls it *bord*; TP, 16) is to relationalize (not relativize) the primacy of philosophy. Seen this way, philosophy is put into contact with something outside of it, namely practice, and it is practice that is thereby elevated to philosophy's constitutive parameter. In this light, philosophy can logically assume its position only by conceding to it being delimited by another factor, namely practice. At the same time, the moment in which philosophy distinguishes itself from practice is the moment when philosophy acknowledges its limits. As Derrida puts it, the price that philosophy has to pay in order to assert itself as "congenital" and thereby retain its "theoretico-philosophical dignity" is to subscribe "to its own limits" (*ibid.*). Strictly speaking, however, philosophy's limits are not its *own* limits. They are not self-given but dictated by the practice laying outside the medium of philosophy, and it is at this point that collectivity resurfaces.

Collectivity manifests itself in the realization that neither philosophy nor practice can exist on their own. Rather, both depend on one another, and both are constituted reciprocally by one another. As Derrida puts it, "[O]verflowing, philosophy's overflowing itself, comprising itself *and* the *rest*, has always belonged to the philosophical" (*ibid.*, 71; emphasis added). Philosophy and practice (even when the latter is considered as philosophy's rest) need each other in order to define themselves in juxtaposition to one another. Because of this, the relationship between philosophy and practice needs to be revisited. They neither contradict each other nor move parallelly and intangibly alongside one another. Rather, they form a collective within which they inform each other by delimiting each other.

This collective co-constitutivity of practice and philosophy from one another gets more contoured and nuanced in Derrida's lengthy

reading of Althusser's self-critique in his "Reply to John Lewis." Therein, Althusser revises his earlier thesis according to which philosophy is a "theory of theoretical practice"²¹ and returns to his understanding of Marxism (of materialism, and therefore, also of the theory/practice-conundrum) as "a (new) practice of philosophy"²² and "class struggle in theory" (LP, 19). For Althusser, of course, what is at stake is not only a reconceptualization of philosophy. Rather, what he aims at is how this reconceptualization of philosophy can become political and "assist in the transformation of the world" (*ibid.*, 68) by working complementarily, parallel to the practice of the masses (cf. *ibid.*). Derrida is of course less interested in the political expediencies of the Althusserian project. In contrast, however, he is very meticulous in reconstructing Althusser's four quadrants that are supposed to cover all possible forms of interaction between theory and practice, namely, "practice in general, theoretical practice, theory, Theory" (TP, 58).²³ The reason for this particular interest is that, through this typology, Althusser provides us, according to Derrida, with a theory which "is defined and defining, the general condition of all those definitions and one defined object among all those definitions" (*ibid.*, 66). What Derrida acknowledges here and could subsequently be called "methodological collectivity" is that the theory-practice enigma cannot be dealt with as if it were a one-sided issue. Rather, if the theory-practice enigma is to be answered properly, we need to trace back the genealogies of the various definitions that this relationship has undergone. This has to do with what Derrida calls the "intricate structure" (*ibid.*, 17) of this problem: namely, the fact that this issue has never been straightforward or clear-cut. This is not to say that the theory-practice problematic is a merely complicated one, which it undoubtedly is. Rather, when Derrida addresses the theory-practice problematic as an "intricate structure," he does so in order to underline its complex character, meaning that while we should definitely start by sketching out the different proposed solutions of this conundrum, we should by no means exhaust ourselves only therein. In order to answer it conclusively, we should strive to accommodate and consider in a holistic and inclusive manner all suggested understandings of this problem. This is

²¹ Althusser, "Reply to John Lewis," 68.

²² Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essay*, (tr.) B. Brewster (London/New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 68. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as LP.

²³ Cf. also Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, (tr.) B. Brewster (London/New York: Verso, 2005), 166–73.

also the reason why Derrida sees himself obliged in the sixth, seventh, and eighth session of the course to turn to Martin Heidegger and in the last session to Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis, as well as the reason why Derrida introduces the cryptical concept of “enveloping.”

“Enveloping” means, for Derrida, first, the materialization or production of “an essence of humanity...raw material...technique” that precedes its realization (*ibid.*, 59). Nevertheless, this would be a purely metaphysical conceptualization of “enveloping” that would not correspond to Marxism’s or materialism’s historicity. Therefore, Derrida suggests a second definition, one that points out that it should not be thought of as coincidental that so many different metaphysical bases have been suggested for human essence throughout philosophy’s intellectual history. For Derrida, “human essence,” “nature,” “truth,” “*techne*,” etc. were concepts that might have been correctly proposed but were at the same time doomed to fail precisely because they attempted to organize and hierarchize the theory/practice-conundrum in only one explanatory register. By tackling this issue from all those different historical angles and by taking into account different systematic and conceptual perspectives, Derrida himself performs the matter’s inherent intricacy, demonstrating how to do so when faced with this problem. No matter whether we seek to “overflow[] the philosophical as such” (*ibid.*, 14), assert the predominance of practice, or supplement philosophy with theory, with Theory, with thinking, or with psychoanalytical technique, we must always take into account, for Derrida, all of these theoretical frameworks. As Derrida suggests in a question in the fourth session that remains ultimately unanswered, the theory/practice debate is never a debate on theory *or* a debate on practice. On the contrary, it is a debate that engulfs, or “envelops” in Derrida’s terminology, forms of theory and forms of practice like “work, production, matter, man, technique, etc.” (*ibid.*, 61) that are so intertwined with one another that only synthetic concepts (and Derrida comes up with the concept of “metaphysics as technological humanism” [*ibid.*]) are capable of dealing with them. In this light, Derrida’s elucidating answer to the enigmatic relationship of the theory/practice pair seems to be that due to the theory/practice pair’s overdetermination by such different theories, only an inclusive and holistic framework is appropriate to their analysis.

A further form of collectivity in Derrida’s reading of Althusser pertains to what could be described as “a collectivity of means” or maybe even “a political collectivity,” if we were to understand politics as an issue of practical means and strategies, and not an issue of

normative principles and corresponding goals. This form of collectivity springs forward as soon as Derrida abandons the experimental concept of the “envelope” and picks up the established concept of “discourse” (TP, 71). A discourse is, for Derrida, not an exclusively linguistic situation or phenomenon. Rather, a discourse is an equally enigmatic, as I would argue, constellation that contains all characteristics of the Enigmatic seen so far. As discourse, the “Althusserian definition of the Marxist practice of philosophy that intends to overflow...the philosophical as such” cannot be “reduced to its philosophical instance,” since the uncertainty regarding its origin is situated, as I have shown above, in a field “that it doesn’t control” (unforeseeability) and that “overflows itself in the course of its operation” (processuality/performativity) (*ibid.*). The reason why Derrida, perhaps unintentionally, resorts to the concept of discourse in order to explicate in his unique materialist way the theory/practice-conundrum is that discourse, as a concept, is neither purely philosophical nor purely practical. Rather, it is a synthetic concept that, analogously to the previously introduced understanding of the term “synthetic,” comprises both theoretical and practical elements. As Derrida states, “[T]he defining discourse is no longer simply that of philosophy defining or situating itself; rather, this defining discourse is itself *also* an act, a political gesture, a practice, it is no longer a purely theoretical language, nor even an essentially theoretical practice” (*ibid.*; emphasis added). The reason, however, why I think that Derrida’s reappropriation of the concept of discourse brings to the fore a different form of collectivity than the “methodological collectivity” mentioned above has to do with the fact that Derrida seems to suggest that discourse’s syntheticity is not the result of previous theoretical investigations. Rather the synthetic character of the discourse seems to recall, correspond, and underscore an almost ontological difference of those elements that the theory/practice-conundrum sought only desperately and vainly to grasp and categorize alongside the two binary registers of either theory or practice. Whereas the different genealogies that “methodological collectivity” consists of and that need to be inclusively addressed are products of a solely theoretical scrutiny, the elements of the discourse predate their theorization and form the subject’s social reality even before becoming part of a theoretical discourse. And it is precisely this materialist auto-existence of those elements that gives them the valence to force themselves upon the discourse and forever colonize it by getting translated into theoretical concepts or forms of practice.

Notwithstanding the other valences of this collectivity, this last form, as already mentioned, awaits patiently till the last session of

the course in order to appear and, as we will see, confers to Derrida's enigmatic materialism its most determinant characteristic. More specifically, this determinant characteristic has to do with the incommensurability and irreducibility that governs the relationship between the subject and the/its Other. Determining the subject through the/its Other should not be understood as separating the one from the other. Rather, it should be conceived of as creating a collectivity where the subject and its/the Other exist both distinctively from one another and, simultaneously, dependent on one another. If Marx's critique of Feuerbach, Gramsci's critique of Croce, and Althusser's self-critique served as the registers from which the different understandings of collectivity could be extrapolated, it is interesting that psychoanalysis is the field where this last form of collectivity transpires.

Towards Materialism as a Collective Science?

Derrida sees in psychoanalysis what he calls "a new departure" (TP, 118) of the theory/practice-conundrum; the attempt "to modify each of those concepts and especially the relation between each of those concepts" by superimposing "the theoretical...as something indissociable from the practical" (*ibid.*). The point of "articulation between theoretical and practical" or the "site," as Derrida calls it, of this indissolubility is detected by Derrida in the "question of 'analytical technique'" (*ibid.*). As he states, the "question of 'analytical technique' is not a subsidiary question to the grand theoretical and practical questions of psychoanalysis" (*ibid.*). Rather, it "governs the relation between the two and it is indeed at that site...that the whole stakes of the analytical movement, and of the agonistic relations within the analytical society are situated" (*ibid.*). Putting aside the question whether the psychoanalytical technique could be considered as the counterpart of the Althusserian conceptualization of discourse or Derrida's more original concept of the envelope—a question that I would answer affirmatively—it is striking to realize that while Derrida shies away from using the word collectivity, he does not hesitate to attribute to the relationship between analyst and analysand the state of a "society." And this is even more striking, given that it is done directly after Derrida diagnoses the analytical movement as an "agonistic relation." The obvious explanation for this would be to assume that Derrida takes the definition of the term society from Ferdinand Tönnies, who sees in society, in comparison to community, an antagonistic field of opposing interests. However, something additional seems to lie in wait behind this antagonism

that unravels the opposing standpoints, interests, identities that the analyst and the analysand represent, something that compels Derrida, after six sessions, to return to the word “enigmatic” one last time. And this something is nothing less than the germs of an understanding of materialism that is opposed to monocausal and hierarchical or divisive explanations of the social (reality) as *either* theory *or* practice and opts, in contrast, for a collective, that is, inclusive, holistic, and overdetermined, conceptualization of the (social) world where its elements and condition co-determine and co-constitute each other. As Derrida puts it in a long and cryptic passage,

One has there an event of self-institution, auto-thesis, of the *auto-thete* or *auto-tely* whose enigma relates in the first place to the idea that the auto- cannot come to a halt, start moving, set out, determine its economy (parking, savings, tradition) except by soliciting in a strange way what relates via *allō* (including responsibility, *verschulden*, and transfer of responsibility), removing the limit separating *en heautō* and *en allō*. (TP, 119)

It is this dependency of the subject (“the auto-”) and the Other (“the *allō*”) on/through each other (“via *allō*”) that makes out the quintessence of Derrida’s enigmatic materialism. Neither the subject nor the/its Other can rely on themselves (“*en heautō* and *en allō*”) in order to self-realize or grasp themselves. Rather, both the subject and the/its Other emanate through a process of “auto-hetero-institution,” as Derrida calls it, where both the subject and the/its Other come to be(ing) (“come to a halt, start moving, set out”) only after they have been related to one another by divesting and resigning their responsibility and sovereignty over themselves and by transferring and consigning them to each other. The latter should not mean that the demarcations between the subject and the/its Other are to be lifted so that the subject and the/its Other get merged and fused with one another. Derrida seems to imply the latter when writing that the process of solicitation through the Other ends in “removing the limit separating *en heautō* and *en allō*.” However, this is not the only interpretation of this line. It would be equally logical to assume that the process of relationalization and solicitation of the subject and its/the Other through each other results in removing the elements separating the one from the other by bringing them into a collective co-existence with one another.

If this is the case, then Derrida’s enigmatic materialism results in something more than a mere eversion of idealism. It becomes a rebuttal of any -ism or centrism that organizes its explanations, analyses, and proposals around one, exclusive basis. Enigmatic

materialism proposes a schema where collectivity, understood as the simultaneous concurrence of differences, is opposed to any form of (epistemological) solipsism, (aetiological) mono-causality, (existential) atomism, and (political) individualism. And seen this way, it wouldn't be futile to revisit the semantics of the Enigmatic that we saw earlier and reinterpret them as results of this original collectivity between the subject and the/its Other.

The enigmatic backward-looking uncertainty regarding the correct definition of the terms "theory" and "practice" has its roots not only in the impossibility to conclusively define these terms. Rather, in this collectivist paradigm, "theory" and "practice" are uncertain because they are collective to the extent that they are *overdetermined*: Throughout their rich intellectual history the concepts of theory and practice have experienced such a proliferation of overlapping determinations and definitions that any attempt towards a monosemantic definition is rendered obsolete. Similarly, the Enigmatic as the forward-looking unforeseeability of the "Theses," of "this text in world history" and of history in general (TP, 9), is not the result of a mere impossibility to assume what is to be expected. Rather, we find ourselves astounded and in awe due to the *plethora* and *profusion* of more than one possible outcome, and we are astonished because we are unable to predict the course of the events. Further, it is collectivity that lends the Enigmatic also its performative character. The fact that the terms "theory" and "practice" are overdetermined, and that therefore no concrete application can be *ex ante* foreseen but only *ex post* acknowledged, shifts the register of the comprehension these terms from defining to acting and performing. It is only after experiencing how the different definitions and future perspectives intermingle, influence, and co-determine one another, and only after having observed the kind of synthetic form they will have finally acquired, that we can be sure about the definite content of those terms. Ultimately, it is because of those elements' struggle, a struggle that may not be a class struggle but is a struggle nonetheless, that "theory" and "practice" find themselves continuously in a process of dynamic resignification. Being co-influenced by more than one definition, expectation, and/or mode of actualization, "theory" and "practice" find themselves in a state of incessant questioning that renders their monumentalization and congealment impossible. "Theory" and "practice" cannot, in this light, but be kept open to new struggles, new influences, and new cooperations, no matter whether theoretical or practical, discursive or therapeutic, contemplative or political.

If (i) the attempt to reconcile the theory/practice-conundrum is (even) according to Derrida the cornerstone of materialism, and if (ii) collectivity is the cipher to unscramble the enigmatic character of Derrida's materialism, where does this leave us in regard to the concept of hope that features so prominently already in the second session of the course?

Materialist Oscillations: From Collective Hope to the Collective as Hope

When explicating Kant's three questions ("What can I know?"; "What should I do?"; "What may I hope?")²⁴ Derrida is surprisingly timid. Following Kant very closely, he sees in the question regarding knowledge ("What can I know?") a purely speculative dimension; in the question regarding ethics ("What should I do?") a purely moral occasion; last, in the question of hope ("What may I hope?") an activity that, as Derrida states, leaning on Kant, "has or is alleged to have an essential relation to the unity of reason inasmuch as the latter is both practical and theoretical" (TP, 25).²⁵

The first and easier question that needs to be answered refers to the functionality of those three questions within Derrida's lectures. The problematic has to do, of course, with the fact that Kant could seem to be out of place in a series of lectures on Marxism and materialism. However, this question is easily answered. As Derrida reminds his students, Althusser sets as an epigraph to his text "On Materialist Dialectic"²⁶ Marx's 8th Thesis on Feuerbach, according to which "[a]ll mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice."²⁷ As soon as we realize that for Kant, and Derrida, those questions "unite" and "bring together" the speculative/theoretical and the practical, the question of knowing, the question of doing, and the question of hope do not but propose different fields of concreti-

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (tr.) P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 677. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CPR.

²⁵ In CPR hope is "simultaneously practical and theoretical, so that the practical leads like a clue to a reply to the theoretical question and, in its highest form, the speculative question" (*ibid.*).

²⁶ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, (tr.) B. Brewster (London/New York: Verso, 2005), 161–218.

²⁷ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," 145.

zation and different angles of reflection of the theory/practice-conundrum.

However, the discussion of hope gets more interesting as soon as Derrida associates with hope the question of the event. It is within the discussion of how hope and the event relate to one another that the word *enigma*, our heuristic device for Derrida's materialism, reappears before resurfacing, as we have seen, as the cornerstone of Derrida's collective materialism in the final session. Yet, in this earlier stage of his lectures, where he is still explaining his outlook, Derrida is categorical that "also the no less *enigmatic* question of the event should be a focus of this seminar" (TP, 25; emphasis added). And to elucidate this concept of the event, a detour through Kant's understanding of hope seems to be indispensable.

Derrida chooses a comparative method to reinforce the notion of hope as an event, one derived from Kant's distinction between knowing and hope. Whereas the temporal structure of knowing discloses something that "*is...because something does happen*" (CPR, 677), the temporal structural of hope discloses something that "*is...because something ought to happen*" (*ibid.*). However in both these formulations, Derrida diagnoses the same eventuation. Knowing and hope connote events because they both need "to come to pass" (TP, 28). No matter whether knowing concludes in the present and hope in the future, since it connotes "the history of what comes (*geschehen, Geschichte*), but also what must arrive" (*ibid.*, 26), each of these notions needs to "end[] up (*hinausläuft*)."¹ This means that none of them finds themselves already existing in the here and now, but only as an eventuation that is yet to come. The following ten pages, almost the entirety of the rest of the second session, offer little insight regarding hope as an event. From Heidegger, G. W. Leibniz, and Angelus Silesius to the (at the time) trendy work of Francis Ponge, and from etymological definitions of the Greek *πράσσω* according to Plato and Aristotle to a brief detour through Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Derrida does not seem to find any new footings in order to enhance his theory of hope as an event. In doing so, he passes over two crucial and interrelated points that he does not deem worthy of pursuit. The first has to do with the role of the sovereign subject or the I in defining what is hope. The second, with the different formulations in Kant's wording of his questions, the fact that while knowing is something that "I can" do (*Was kann ich wissen?*), hope is something that "I may" do (*Was darf ich hoffen?*). And it is in this "may" that I would like to see the fundamentals for a materialist and collectivist—these two terms should by now be considered tautological—understanding of hope.

Derrida is, of course, aware of the solipsistic way Kant poses these questions. As he underscores,

One must be attentive to the fact that the utterance here defining something, namely interests, the interests of reason, of *my* reason, has an interrogative form, which is a strange way to define a content; and further, that the interest so defined by present tense interrogative utterances (What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope?) relate to the first person, they are questions posed by an *I*, now, defining *my* reason in the form of a question, not reason in general but *my* reason, and *my* reason in general, the interests of *my-reason* in general. (*Ibid.*, 25)

Yet, it suffices to apply to Kant's definition of hope the elements that we found housed in the notion of the Enigmatic in order to challenge the omnipotent solipsism of the hoping "I" and transform hope into a collective endeavour. From the perspective of the Enigmatic as a device of the collective, hope becomes *hoping*, something active, not static, since, as Kant argues and Derrida indisputably agrees, it is not yet here but "to-come [*à-venir*]" (*processuality*) (*ibid.*, 26); it cannot predict the concrete form of its own realization (*unforeseeability*); it is bound to theory inasmuch as it is bound to practice and, therefore, impossible in its determining origination (*uncertainty*); and, last but not least, in needing to "pass...by" (*ibid.*, 28), hope demonstrates a unique performativity that "reinforces the trajectory, the course, the place," allowing for what is hoped for to be concretized throughout the process of hoping (*performativity*) (*ibid.*, 27). Further, hoping is the process where the theoretical and the practical find themselves joined (*vereinigt sich*) in one another (*methodological collectivity*), as well as the process where what is to be hoped should be conceived as the collective result of its determinants, its process, and finally the means of its materialization (*collectivity of means*).

Notwithstanding, it is this necessity for permission, authorization, and consent, conveyed through the "may" that transforms hoping to a genuine materialist and collectivist occasion, that debilitates once and for all the alleged sovereignty of the hoping "I." Kant (and Derrida) are aware of the need to collectively configure hope. After all, and as Kant argues and Derrida repeats, in hope "the practical leads like a clue to a reply to the theoretical question" (CPR, 677). However, this confirmation seems to have a hierarchical character. It is not a horizontal dependence but rather a sanction and an approval granted from something temporally older, spatially higher, and normatively more fundamental. Yet, this can easily be upended if hoping is seen through the lens of Derrida's collectivist, enigmatic

materialism. Understood as a collective venture where the subject ("the auto-") and the/its Other ("the *allō*") depend on one another ("via *allō*"), hoping stops being a solipsistic, mono-causal, atomistic, and individualistic occasion and is transformed into a collective, inclusive, and overdetermined effort. In order to hope not only theory and/or practice in all their discursive definitions, nor only the different means of their realization and the various ways of their implementation need to be taken into account. In addition, each and every concrete and different (social) Other also needs to be co-consulted and factored into the collectivity of hoping.

And this seems, ultimately, to be Derrida's most original contribution regarding the theory/practice-conundrum. Instead of providing a supplement for the masses, as Althusser argued (cf. LP, 68), Derrida's enigmatic materialism transforms the theory/practice-conundrum to a collective constellation of distinctive, yet dependent discourses, factors, causes, and actions that, like shrapnels, are hurled, spined, and dashed in all directions. What they perforate is not only their contemporaneous or our current understandings of materialism as one-sided doxas and doctrines. Rather, they launch a relentless attack against any form of monism and stress collectivity as the basis upon which theory and practice are to be recalibrated.

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