Cultural Logic: Marxist Theory & Practice
Volume 27 (2023), pp. 47-66

Complex Totality and *The Arcades Project*: Towards a Messy Materialism of the *Lebenswelt*

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between Althusser and Walter Benjamin, looking in particular at their respective conceptions of Dialectical Materialism. What the paper argues is that each of their respective conceptions of history can be understood as providing a supplement to the other, where Benjamin is able to capture in a concrete sense what Althusser is describing at a structural level – in terms of complex history, determination in the last instance, the conjuncture, interpellation, etc. In closing, the paper will use this discussion to point towards an understanding of Dialectical Materialism that is interwoven with a phenomenological conception of the *lebenswelt*.

Key Words: Althusser, Benjamin, Totality, Dialectical Materialism, Experience, Lifeworld

Introduction

Here we will put forward and defend the position that both Althusser and Benjamin hold to the same core principles of Dialectical Materialism. In this manner it will be argued that both interpret capitalism through the problematic of a complex totality, and the concepts of overdetermination, economic determinism in the last instance, the encounter, and the conjuncture. From this rubric of notions, we will see a form of dialectical analysis develop that is directly related to concrete lived-experience. To get to this eventual position we need first to see how over and above their dramatic differences, the basic accounts of Dialectical Materialism found in Althusser's *For Marx* (2005) and *Reading Capital* (2009) as well as Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (2002), are fundamentally the same – with the primary difference between them being that *what Althusser accomplishes at the theoretical level*, *Benjamin accomplishes at the level of concrete analysis*.[1] The following has been divided into three parts which are intended to adequately defend this claim of their shared conception of a Dialectical Materialism of lived-experience. Our initial focus will be on drawing out and making explicit the basic principles of Althusser's Dialectical Materialism. Once complete we will move to demonstrate how Benjamin is committed to these same basic principles as well. From this study, an all too brief gesture will be made in the third and final section that will attempt to show how the approach to Dialectical Materialism shared by

[1] When read in conjunction Althusser's structural analysis can help to dissipate the ambiguity within Benjamin's largely concrete presentations, while Benjamin's concrete presentations help dispel the vagueness in Althusser's largely structural account.

Althusser and Benjamin can provide us with the resources necessary to begin to think of how to construct a Marxist Phenomenology – and thus when taken together both thinkers can be seen as providing us with the conceptual resources necessary to breach the gap which separates purely structural analysis and an analysis of concrete lived-experience.[2]

Part I. Althusser

Section 1. Althusser's Conception of Dialectical Materialism

The first step of this project will begin with Althusser's conception of Dialectical Materialism, as this will serve as the anchor-point of our comparison with Benjamin. As is noted repeatedly throughout *Reading Capital* (2004), Dialectical Materialism is said to have been best encapsulated in the scientific theory of Marxism set out in the three volumes of *Capital* (1990).[3] This thesis is central to Althusser's overall presentation of Dialectical Materialism, and we can interpret his textual justifications for this claim as breaking down into three separate streams of explanation; these are three sets of principles that remain more or less consistent themes of commitment throughout the entirety of his intellectual production, and they form the backbone of our own present study (Jay 1984). Stated clearly they are: **(a)** the notion of a "*concrete differentiated complex totality*," **(b)** the structural relationship of, and between, "*over-determination*" and "*determination in the last instance*," and finally, **(c)** the notions of the "*conjuncture*," the "*encounter*," and "*interpellation*." When properly understood in relation to one another, these three sets of concepts provide us with the essential components of Althusser's reading of Dialectical Materialism, and for our interests, these concepts reveal the similarity of Althusser's project and Benjamin's own work. Given this importance we need to unpack each of these in turn.

Section 2.1 A Differentiated Complex Totality

An essential thread running throughout Althusser's writings is the immense theoretical effort he expends in attempting to reimagine the concept of totality, with the goal being to liberate the notion of totality from its restrictive, "expressive-Hegelian" formulations. When this Hegelian conception of totality is taken as the problematic within which Marx himself worked, the resulting interpretations of Marxism are either inherently reductive and fatalistic, *or*, overly volunteeristic and idealistic, and in either case such interpretations yield the same failed variants of Marxist Praxis for which these views are attributed, whether it be Soviet Marxism, "evolutionary" Social Democracy, or the vulgarized Leninism of the new left.[4] In his analysis Althusser understands each of these errant strains of Marxist interpretation as arising from a failure to register the sense

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[2] This relates to a broader thesis outside the purview of this paper that there is a deep phenomenological strain of thought running throughout Marxism – a subterranean current – beginning with the discussion of Alienation and Engels' *History of the English Working Class*, and through to *Capital* and the discussion of the working day or large-scale machine labor.

[3] Althusser & Balibar (2009). We will refer to this text in the footnotes as *RC.* An important distinction in *Reading Capital* that both Althusser and Balibar repeatedly make is that Dialectical Materialism necessarily needs to be distinguished from Historical Materialism, or the philosophical-ideological theory found in Marx's other writings.

[4] We see this mirrored in his critiques of Plekhanov (reductionism), Gramsci (historicist), Lukács (idealistic), and Bernstein (evolutionary).

of ontological "differentiation" operative within the notion of totality developed by Marx.[5] The difference lies in that on the Hegelian model, temporal development of the social world is interpreted through the problematic of a single, continuously-unfolding, and homogeneous, historical process; whereby a singular self-same essence is brought to its complete manifest expression over the course of time. Against this Althusser's argues that Marx's writings post-1845 reflect a growing and more complex sense of totality, and so by the time we arrive at the writings of the "mature" Marx circa 1857, it is necessary to read and understand totality as it forms an ontologically differentiated, discontinuous, non-homogeneous, non-linear, and multi-temporal concept.[6] In fact, Althusser argues that Marx's "*scientific discovery*" is itself no more than his realization and articulation of a new problematic that transforms how we approach and think-through the notion of totality – one that takes *a differentiated and complex totality* as the new horizon of objective inquiry. The eventual role of Marxist analysis, and moreover, the essential feature that makes Marxist analysis a science according to Althusser, lies precisely in the manner in which Marxism opens up and renders this differential totality clear (Resch 1992).[7]

In *For Marx* (2005) this presentation of the complex totality found in the writings of Marx is given a more refined analysis, whereby the Marxist totality is said to exist as a composite construct of many "differentiated" "logics" and "structural levels" that are operative in the production of this totality itself (Jay 1984). Taking the traditional base and superstructure model as the orientating frame of reference, Althusser reinterprets these traditional categories as giving rise to and as supporting their own unique "structural strata" of modal engagement and determination – whereby to have a distinct "structural level" is to be able to demarcate the unique mode of actualization and the conjoining practices that this level gives rise to and supports (Jay 1984, Althusser 2009). Going further each of these levels is itself then broken down and understood in terms of the unique set of sub-structures, interrelating elements, and modes of production that "structurally determine" the specific concrete phenomenon that passes through and arises out of a given set of structures (e.g. there is the structure of the family, the structure of working-class culture, the structure of policing, the structures of religious life, the structures of entertainment, the structural plateaus of romance, the structures of education, the structures of journalism, the structures of the juridical system, the structures of the medical system, the structures of political systems, and so forth). In this sense Althusser refers to different levels as comprising different unique regional spheres of constitution.[8] In the essay on *Ideological State-Apparatuses* (2014) and in *For Marx* (2005), this process is developed explicitly in relation with the status of the agent, and from this analysis comes his writings on "interpellation" and

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[5] Central to this differentiation is Althusser's infamous claim of the epistemic break or rupture which commentators often fail to notice as occurring within Marx's writings, separating his earlier, anthropological, speciesist, and historicist writings from the more refined, structural, and scientific analysis of the Mature works. Putting the actual epistemic status of such a proclaimed and dramatic "rupture" to the side, we can take Althusser's central point as making explicit the difference between Marx and his predecessors, whether they be Hegelian and Feurebachian, or from the field of Classical Political-Economy. See: Resch, Robert Paul. *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory.* University of California Press, Berkeley. 1992. Chapter 4.

[6] *RC* pp. 29-37, 96-100, 132-135, 200-214.

[7] *RC.* pp. 146-169. This is of course the essence of Althusser's famed argument for an epistemological rupture separating the problematic of the young Marx from that of the mature Marx. We will go deeper into this issue, and make some brief passings which might justify such a reading, but for the purposes of this paper Althusser's views are not being argued for, as much as they are being explicated for the sake of comparative analysis. There will be more to say of this later on.

[8] Althusser, Louis. *For Marx.* Verso Press, New York. 2005. Referred to in footnotes as *FM*. pp. 89-127.

"ideology."[9] In *Reading Capital* (2009) this is expanded upon in far more theoretical detail as we are told that as agents pass through each of the abovementioned differentiated levels they come to exist as merely a "*structural effect*," meaning that agents exist as the by-product of the different levels of structural interaction that function together in the production of the socio-economic world in accordance with which we are shaped to exist (Althusser 2009). If an analysis or agent fails to render its precise nature as a "*structural effect"* clear and explicit, then on these grounds we have justification for calling such practices "*ideological*" (Althusser 2005, 2009). The new field of scientific research that Marx discovered according to Althusser is precisely the terrain of "structural effect analysis," looking in particular at those structures that are unique to the field of political-economy. In this manner, Hegel, Feuerbach, the Young Hegelians, and the writers of Classical Political-Economy each failed in their own right to reach this stage of critical realization, where blind to how their own orientation was structurally effected in this differential manner, they each failed to grasp the nature of their own multiformed conditioning, and in its stead they offered a universal and smooth depiction of agency and society that reflected the conditions, aspirations, and world-view of bourgeois society (i.e. their presentations are ideological in that they are unconsciously reflecting the demands of the structures in which they have been interpellated).[10]

As we've made mention, the "break" within Marx's writings is attributed precisely to Marx's growing appreciation of the "differentiation" of the number of registers that contribute, each according their own unique stream of causal impingements, in the production of a given phenomenon. *Instead of the totality being something immanent within each particular, as it is with Hegel, the totality now becomes the by-product of each particular structural level of constitution*. With a hierarchy of different levels there corresponds a hierarchy of different regions of structural effectivity, and every level is comprised of its own unique, "non-syncopated," temporal flow, its own unique rhythm, its own "cycle of production and reproduction," and its own "logic" of agency (Althusser 2009, Jay 1984). Taken together each of these structural dynamics conditions the distribution of its elements, establishing their relations, setting forth their torsions and divisions, as these are imparted on each particular that takes part in their functioning.[11] Education, politics, mass media, the government, the family, and so forth each condition elements in their own way, where "society" in the abstract is the complex totality of this manifold multiplicity of structuralizations.

Totality as a differentiated complexity of structures, and understood as a confluence of varied, non-syncopated processes of production, and cycles of temporal production and reproduction, presents us with an understanding of totality that escapes the terminal epistemic issues that plagued the Hegelian expressive-totality (Resch 1992). With Hegel, despite the empirical variety of practices, the different levels of interaction, and the varied elements operative within a given stage of the Dialectic, these differentiations are ultimately reduced in being understood in a manner that each element of differentiation was taken as merely expressing the same essence of *Geist* (the Notion) at a given stage of its self-development. Thus even when

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[9] Althusser, Louis. *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.* Verso Press, New York. 2014. Referred to in foot notes as *ISA*.

[10] *RC* pp.161-181.To this end we can see *The German Ideology*, the "*Holy Family*," and the emphasis on "immanent critique" as points of reference for Althusser's basic argument here. And, indeed, in *For Marx* he references these as the "texts of the break," which he places as occurring between 1845-1857. Also see (Althusser 2014).

[11] According to Althusser it is precisely these registers that we track when we evaluate a structure as being either progressive or regressive.

approached individually, each of its "different" aspects is still necessarily interpreted through a sense of homogeneity, as each unique particular is interpreted as expressing the same singular essence. "Difference" within Hegel's framework therefore exists as a difference to be effaced, a temporary difference that requires the reduction of itself to the identity of a single essence if it is to be understood (Althusser 2009). As Althusser states the matter, difference for Hegel takes on an *artificial appearance*, for as soon as one assumes the famed perspective of the "we" or "us" in the *Phenomenology*, "we" can come to see each of these differences as really different manifestations of the same essence. It is precisely this manner of understanding the social whole that is identified as being the fundamental source for all reductive or vulgar readings of Marx, whether mechanistic, economistic, materialistic, or evolutionary (Jay 1984). The point of the thesis of the epistemological break is to argue that from 1845-1857 Marx's thought ruptured with the Hegelian manner of thinking of the whole, wherein his understanding of social phenomena grew more nuanced with time, leading to the formation of the understanding of a "differentiated complex totality."[12]

The central drive of Althusser's life's work could be interpreted as providing a sustained presentation and defense of such a differentiated and complex totality as it was present in the writings of Marx, and his brilliance lies in how by doing so he provides Marxists with the conceptual resources necessary to avoid issues of reduction and logocentricism, two of the more common critiques levelled at contemporary Marxists. For Althusser the notion of complex totality is intrinsically tied to our ability to understand social phenomena in a "Pluralistic" manner; a trait we will see come to the fore again in Benjamin's own presentation of Dialectical Materialism.[13]

This long survey of complex totality was necessary for us to get Althusser's basic framing of Dialectical Materialism off of the ground. At this stage the Althusserian notion of "complex totality" allows us to understand any particular phenomenon as an "effect" of an aggregation of disjointed structures, fields, regions, logics, temporal flows, and processes of (re-)production. However, at this point all we have presented is a static structural analysis of a disjointed and un-unified picture of Dialectical Materialism. What needs to be demonstrated next is the thread that joins together this diverse set of structures into a complex "aggregate," as opposed to existing as a loose "heap" or a mere "pile" of contingently relating structures, and so we will next evaluate how these different structures "hang-together" as an imbricated totality. In this sense what we currently lack is an account of the movement and relationship between the varied components of this differentiated set of structures. To answer this we turn to two of the more important conceptions of Althusser's analysis, namely "economic determination in the last instance" and superstructural "overdetermination" of economic determination.

Section 2.2 Determination in the Last Instance and Overdetermination

"*Determination in the last instance*" serves several roles within Althusser's system (Althusser 2005, 2009, 2014) but its primary function is to capture the unique manner in which economics is said to interact with, and to determine, the different levels and regions of the complex totality. Once this notion of determination is on the table, Althusser will be able to retain and

[12] We will provide textual evidence for this in a few sections as we turn to Marx's *18th Brumaire* as providing an exemplar study of this differentiated complex totality.

[13] For now I rely on the charity of the reader that we take "pluralism" in its simplest sense as a multiplicity of explanatory schemas. We will explain this more adequately later on.

clarify Marx's critical analysis about the integral function of economics, while simultaneously safeguarding the availability of a pluralistic and non-reductive explanation of social phenomenon. Along these lines, as Althusser develops his notion of determination in the last instance the metaphor of the economic "base" is transformed into the metaphor of the economic "infrastructure" or "scaffolding," a transformation that Althusser favors when trying to understand the role of the structures that Marx traditionally referred to by the technical terms of the "means of production," the "forces of production," and the "relations of production" (Jay 1984).[14]

With this said, Althusser describes the relation between the economic means of production and the differentiated complex totality as breaking down into *three* distinct manners of relating. Each one of these senses captures a different way in which we are to interpret the core thesis of determination within the framework of Dialectical Materialism – namely they demonstrate how we are supposed to think about the claim that the economic base supports, gives rise to, and conditions the social-ideological superstructure.

First and foremost, the means of production are described as determining the superstructure in so far as the economic mode of actualization creates and supports the basic modal framework of viable and realizable practical possibilities of superstructural determination (Althusser 2009). In this manner the economic structures of a society operate as the "ultimate determining conditions," where basic economic relations establish the basic modal limitations of what levels can possibly be realized at the level of the superstructure. In this first understanding the structures of economics are said to create and enable the basic terrain through which *any* myriad of different structures can even come to be realized. As Althusser emphasizes in *Reading Capital*, this first sense of determination refers to the literal material substratum of products, production, infrastructure, market-societies, and their different supporting, adjunct, and enabling processes. Within the age of capitalism these materialize as *relations* and *instantiations* of private property, the commodity-form, the formal subsumption of labor to capital in the Labor-Capital relation, and it is this sense of economic determination that establishes the basic precondition of what kinds of superstructural modalizations are realizable (Althusser 2009). Through this first sense of determination Althusser argues that the type of superstructural activities which will be developed within capitalism are always going to be colored and pre-determined according to the different modal determinations first established in the sphere of economics.

With the *second* sense of conditioning the economic base is said to inscribe, impress, and instill a set of imperatives, in addition to underwriting a specific operative logic, into all items that arise as structural effects of the basic economic determinations of capital. Here the "economic base" is understood as inscribing a certain logic into individuals whereby this structure comes to dictate the action of agents through establishing the norms of varying forms of activity. As Althusser states, capital necessitates select cognitive tendencies, behavioral activities, and imperatives of action are to be followed and optimized, such that "economic success or pressure" infuses the entire life of agency at present, revealing elements immanent to subjectivity that are the by-products of the structure of capital, wherein the value-form imperative originates not in the

[14] *RC* pp. 225-251. We should note for those who might be skeptical of Althusser dedicating his efforts at analyzing and properly rendering the structural nature of the base and its relation to the superstructure, Balibar devotes the majority of his time and efforts in *Reading Capital* to understanding the exact nature of the productive and reproductive processes of the means of production, looking to explore these concepts in a more concrete sense, thereby "fleshing-out" Althusser's account.

will of select individuals, but emanates from the logic of capital itself (Althusser 2005, 2009). The need to suppress wages, the need to increase rates of exploitation, the need to maximize productivity through labor organization and management, the need to earn and hoard money, the need to take into account financial concerns before acting in the world, and so forth – giving us what Marx refers to as the self-valorization of capital as it becomes an economic imperative in the life of individual agents (Marx 1990). For Althusser this second sense of determination explains how capital becomes reflected and impressed onto larger forms of life, or a specific form of the social community, leading to what Balibar calls, a la Tronti, the "*factory*" or "*market-society*" (Tronti 2019). Here the whole point is that in this second sense the base is said to normalize certain modalities of action as dominant while rendering others as errant or impossible, giving us a process of capitalization that Althusser describes as instilling a certain sense of "modal effectivity" into agents (Althusser 2009). So regardless of the differentiated structural site with which one is engaged (the family, the courts, mass media, education, etc.), this economic imperative will be there as a manifest or latent background element, conditioning agents and their actions.[15]

The *third* sense in which the base is said to condition the superstructure is in terms of "*contradictions*" and "*revolutionary transformations*" (Althusser 2009). The contradictions generated at the level of the labor-relation and capital-relation find their "articulation" within each subsequent, though differentiated, superstructural level. If time and space permitted, we would delve into the nexus of thoughts developed in connection to this sense of conditioning – such as Althusser's discussions on "uneven development," "the weakest link," "ruptural unities," "contradiction" and similar thoughts. [16] The point of this third sense of economic determination is to capture the determining role of the contradictions and antagonisms which are produced by the economic base in periods of revolutionary transformation as they find unique reverberations in different levels of superstructural life. Going any further into this final sense of determination in the last instance is unnecessary for the general purposes of the present project, and for this reason we are forced to merely flag this third sense of determination, leaving its actual analysis to other more in-depth studies (see Resch 1992).[17]

Taking these three senses of conditioning together gives us three distinct senses of the well-worn phrase, "the economic base determines the superstructure." In Althusser's vocabulary these are the three primary ways that *economics* functions as a *determination in the last instance* (Althusser 2009). Where regardless of the other structural determinations operative over and above this, these three levels of economic determination are primary, universal, and irrevocable across all spheres of social life.

The operative use of the concept of "*overdetermination*" rests in being able to capture and convey the manner in which *over and above* these primary senses of economic determination there exists a distinct level of structural operations whose constitution involves the *reconstitution* of the

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[15] It is this effectivity which Althusser uses to explain Don Quixote's anachronistic model of agency, where what defines him as a laughably tragic hero is how he seeks to instantiate a type of imperative that no longer correlates with changes that have occurred in his economic base (Althusser 2009).

[16] *FM* pp. 95-107.The most interesting of which is his discussion of contradictions, which he likens to a trait or determining factor of all phenomena. In conjunction with this he develops nine senses of contradiction (1) primary (2) secondary (3) internal (4) external (5) antagonistic (6) non-antagonistic (7) current (8) latent (9) articulated. All phenomena are described as being a composite of a complex conjunction of contradictions.

[17] *FM* pp. 95-107, *RC* pp. 307-345.

contradictions and determinations of the economic base in novel lights. By *articulating* the general economic determinations discussed through the unique logic and structures that are distinctive of a specific level of the superstructure, each structural sphere of the superstructure is said to create its own coloring of determining forces, terrain of antagonisms, and modal realizations that operate independently, and, in many cases, over and above any determination from the economic sphere (Althusser 2009). In this manner, the three senses of determination we have discussed are said to each receive a unique "reconstitution" or "articulation" within a given region of the superstructure (e.g. religion, family life, politics, journalism, education, social media, etc.).[18] We will see examples of this in Benjamin, but for now we can think of the emerging phenomenon of "sexting" as providing an illustration of determination in the last instance and overdetermination. The particular logic that explains why one person would send a nude photo of themselves to another at time X will in most standard cases be formulated independent of any direct consideration of economic determining factors, and as we see there are indeed a number of non-economic explanatory frameworks that can be appealed to in order to explain this new cultural practice: e.g. sexual biology, psychoanalysis, structures of patriarchy, bio-politics, 3rd-wave feminism, etc. Althusser's point is that regardless of these different pluralistic frameworks which one assumes in order to explain this activity, there is the undeniable fact that a particular economic infrastructure and supporting web of economic social relations are necessary preconditions for the existence of this very activity itself, and as such this activity can be said to be *"overdetermined"* while simultaneously *"determined in the last instance"* – in so far as select economic structures had to create the modal sub-terrain that would allow this social practice to reconstitute and articulate these economic determinations through a unique structure of "economic-independent" social engagements.[19] With this analysis we see Althusser's differentiated complex totality begin to bear fruit.

With "*overdetermination*" we are given a Marxist justification for the explanation of processes which operate independent of their economic determination, wherein each level of the superstructure functions according to its own logic of development, its own process of production, its own processes of causal efficacy, and most importantly, according to its own set of contradictions and imperatives. Because each level is said to possess its own unique process of effectivity and determination this analysis opens room for contingency and variation in terms of how a given level will articulate specific economic phenomena. With overdetermination Althusser earns the thought that there can exist economically independent modal limitations with a Marxist framework and, moreover, that there can exist economic-independent imperatives of action, concerns, values, modes of cognition, and the like (Althusser 2009, 2014).[20] All while these things are still, at a fundamental level, determined by economics.

Overdetermination thus prevents any vulgar form of economistic reduction while explaining the nature of pluralistic determination that accounts for the heterogeneity and

[18] In Althusser's analysis the terms articulation and reconstitution receive a certain technical sense of understanding that turns them into forensic tools within Althusser's system.

[19] The technology of cameras have existed since the 19th century, but it is only in the last fifteen years that a novel widespread adoption of cameras, in the form of smartphones, has occurred, suggesting support for an argument in favor of determination in the last instance and the creation of an economic material substratum; i.e. the economic nexus of smartphones have altered the very dynamic of photography itself.

[20] What Althusser would dub a particular structural-specific Ideology. Hence this analysis of overdetermination links up with his Leninist commitments and his theory of Praxis.

irreducibility of distinct areas of the lived-world. However, as Althusser is also quick to point out, *the different levels of the superstructure can only ever be adequately understood if they are understood as particular articulations and displacements of the contradictions and operations of the economic infrastructure. Overdetermination is only ever an overdetermination of the economic contradictions on which a given level is constructed. Economics determines and the superstructure overdetermines, reflecting and refracting the conditions of economic reality into channels of independent determination and operation* (Althusser 2009, Jay 1984, Resch 1992).[21]

Taking all of this together, Althusser's notion of a differentiated complex totality as a three-tiered conception of determination in the last instance placed in conjunction with his notion of overdetermination represents the basic interpretation of Dialectical Materialism to which Althusser himself ascribes. In his discussion, he refers to this general picture of the differentiated complex totality famously as representing a "*process without a subject*," an important phrase he justifies throughout his writings – cashing out this provocative phrasing through a descriptive analysis of "*structural causality*" or "*structural effects*" (Althusser 2009). When this structural analysis is applied at a concrete level of explaining a particular phenomenon then this type of analysis has the potential to become a *science* for Althusser, representing a feat for which Marx created the possibility in his works on *Capital*.

At this stage this long passage through Althusser might seem miles away from Benjamin and the *Arcades Project,* but this connection will find its most explicit formation when the authors of *Reading Capital* move from this structural analysis of Dialectical Materialism to the phenomenology of the "*Conjuncture*" and the "*Encounter*."[22] After this concluding section on Althusser we will finally be in the position to transition to the works of Benjamin, at which time each of the features we have just discussed will re-appear under new lights.

Section 2.3 The Conjuncture and the Encounter

The concept of the "*Conjuncture*" is intended to capture the spatial-temporal particularity of the set of microscopic conditioning factors and contradictions, both economic and overdetermining, that interweave together as the conditioning structures *through which* a real concrete phenomenon (an event, agent, or behavior, etc.) is instantiated (Althusser 2009, 2014). Here varied structural contours necessarily take on a specific socio-historical form, and in both *For Marx* and the essay on the *Ideological State Apparatuses*, the particular inner-development and movement of any conjuncture requires a *site-specific analysis*, where an analyst provides what he refers to as a "topography" of the forces of the complex totality that are at play in creating the field on which individual agents act and experience the world.[23]

The conjuncture in this manner is necessarily connected to the individual and their experience of some conjuncture of structural conditioning. In Althusser's later writings on

[21] For this reason Althusser argues that economic contradictions are not sufficient to produce a revolution, though they are necessary to understand any social phenomenon in its most adequate sense.
[22] It is interesting to note that this dynamic of determination in the last instance is not explicitly revisited or refuted in Althusser's later work on Aleatory Materialism, where contingency and the indeterminacy of the swerve are made the focus of analysis allowing other discussions, like that of economic determinism, to pass by in silence.
[23] *ISA* pp. 103-148. Even knowledge is considered to exist as an effect that arises out of a nexus of practices – and hence exists as a conditioned cognitive apprehension of the world, an orientation, a socially informed world-view.

"*Aleatory Materialism*," this moment of the agent's experience of the conjecture is referred to as "*the Encounter*" (Althusser 2014).[24] The appellation of *the encounter* is intended to capture the manner in which agents live the conjecture as a contingent coming to be of the conjuncture-as-manifested. Determined both in terms of economics and of overdetermining structures, the particular unfolding and realization of the world through a given individual lives their experience will represent a *contingent experience*, and while certain outcomes can be more predictable or mathematically likely given the input of certain structures, there are always outliers, unique compositions, and idiosyncratic responses that will vary across agents and conditions. In short, when the above structural analysis is read in terms of a given agent's actual experience we will find that their encounter with the conjuncture they face will always bear elements of uniqueness and open indeterminacy regarding the particularities they will so experience.[25] For example, a student's decision to take out a loan is determined in the last instance by economic factors and overdetermined by qualities of their family life, their employment conditions, the university they attend, the policies of the federal government, the refraction of student loans through in the media, the unique cultural and moral values instilled in them, the experiences of others in their community, and so forth. As a result, the encounter of agents with this conjuncture will vary on a student-by-student basis, and there are no ways to predict beforehand how the experience of student loans will unfold for a given student – as we must engage in a site-specific and case-by-case analysis to uncover how this logic will play out in a given situation.

Through these twin notions Althusser is able to deepen and radicalize the analytical reduction of life to a "state of affairs," as under this rubric the idea of an abstract and neutral state of affairs is given a transformative political and existential significance through the notions of an individual's *encounter* with the *conjuncture*. With this move Althusser is able to capture how "determination in the last instance" and "overdetermination" relate and conjoin in the historical becoming of any given state of affairs, all while at the same time accounting for the spontaneity, radical contingency, a radical pluralism that marks the lived-encounter of this across different agents. Returning to what was said earlier we can now better appreciate in what manner a given conjuncture will represent the composite production of a nexus of non-syncopated structural determinations, each with their own distinct temporal rhythm, and each existing as a unique confluence of overdetermined economic determinations. Any single reductive analysis will necessarily fail to exhaust the explanatory potential within a particular conjuncture, and for this reason, vulgar reductive Marxism and its foundations in the Hegelian model of an expressive totality conflate nuance, misrecognize differences, and ultimately fail to adequately preserve the structural complexity of lived-experience. Yes, economics may be determinate, but this does not necessitate that economics will always dominate in any particular conjuncture, as there are always elements of individual free choice and happenstance determining events.

For an example of all of this, Marx's *18th Brumaire* (2008) demonstrates each of these points masterfully. Here Marx clearly depicts how party politics, individual political ambitions, and the Machiavellian maneuvering of daily political interests can't themselves be reduced to or explained solely in terms of the particular economic developments that preceded or accompanied the political machinations that look place in France from 1820 to 1880. The intrigues and

[24] Althusser, Louis. *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings 1978-1987.* Verso Press, New York. 2006. We will refer to this here as *AM.* pp. 163-207. The core drive of the later work on *Aleatory Materialism* is the desire to "think necessity as the becoming necessary of the encounter with the contingent."
[25] *AM* pp. 163-207.

movements which led to the *coup* of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte were overdetermined by the logic and structure of politics, the fears and desires of the newly minted bourgeoisie class, the role and function of media, its political coverage, and state censorship, the place and dynamics of political parties in the assemblies, the importance of cabinets and ministers, the role of the army, conditions of bribery, elements of corruption, the status of the peasant class, the state of the proletariat, prior historical events, and so forth.[26] The overdetermined explanation of Bonaparte's ascension in terms of politics is the legitimate and proper explanation; however, the determining factor in the last instance for this his *coup* was the Paris Commune and the harsh economic exploitation and disenfranchisement which pervaded the atmosphere before and after this event was crushed, wherefrom we see anew the counter-revolutionary *coup* that took place. Moreover, the movements and results of the rise of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte were the culmination of hundreds of different actors, who each in their own way, and for their own motives, acted in various ways in response to their encounters with these conjunctures of events. Looked at as a compounding multiplicity, agents were reacting to other agents who were reacting to other agents, all of whom were encapsulated by the same historical conjuncture of events, albeit approached from the standpoint of their own position within the complex totality of capital that defined that moment (Caussidière, L. Blanc, Barthélemy Flocon, Louis Philippe, the Duchess of Orleans, Ledru-Rollin, the Legislative Assembly, Changarnier, the Elysee newspaper, the War Minister Hautpoul, the Minister of Justice Rouher, etc.).[27]

Thus, in accordance with the conjuncture, Althusser's reading of Dialectical Materialism now deepens even further when he turns his analysis to the agents who themselves live through a particular conjuncture as we see an account of Dialectical Materialism as a lived-experience being explicated. The subject here is said to exist as an effect, as agents come to be through the different structures which condition the lived-world, meaning that we ourselves need to be understood as products of these structures, coming to existence through complex structural situations which condition our sense of ourselves as free agents acting as we so please. Making this move represents an account of a materialized dialectics where we can begin to understand how capitalism involves elements of both determinism and volunteerism.[28]

With this said, we can now pause and take stock of what we have found in our exploration of Althusser. In his lights Dialectical Materialism amounts to the structural analysis of a complex, differentiated, totality. This totality is determined and overdetermined by the respective structures of the economic base and the social superstructure, and agents are said to exist as structural effects, interpellated by the interstices of the overlapping processes of determination that create the present

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[26] Marx, Karl. *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.* International Publishers, New York. 2008. pp. 29-36, 44-51, 81-92, 101-116, 125-135.

[27] Interestingly for us, this is the exact same period that Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is focused on excavating, the period of the "Haussmanization" of Paris and the explosive birth of bourgeoisie consumer society as a reaction to revolutionary movements of the proletariat.

[28] From within the conjuncture the agent takes up various perspectives and forms different understandings of the social world in which they live. Thus their world-view will be comprised of a set of different concepts, rules, axioms, modes of cognizing, understanding of subject-object relations and the like. Referred to as the "Problematic," this understanding of the conjuncture is said to literally structure the field of sight, rendering experience into a limited, one-sided, and blind encounter with an event. As Althusser argues all seeing necessitates blindness, or all sight involves a dynamic of non-sight or over-sight, with absence being a necessary by-product of experiential presence. With a problematic comes a set of concepts, a world-view, a pattern of thought, a form of cognition, silences, omissions, etc.

conjuncture of an encounter. As we pivot now to Benjamin it will be our goal in the following section to demonstrate how each of these features re-appears and structures comes to structure the account of Dialectical Materialism that we see developed in his *Arcades Project.*

Part II. Benjamin and *The Arcades Project*

Thus far we have reverted to examples when necessary to help us get across what it is that Althusser was trying to express on the plane of theoretical analysis. It is important to note that Althusser himself is alarmingly sparse on examples, and in fact, his often-derogatory classification as a "structuralist" can be attributed in part to the above-described overemphasis on structural analysis (Jay 1984). One of the theses of this paper is that this classification, while appealing on the surface, actually betrays the concrete applicability of Althusser's theory of Dialectical Materialism. As we saw with the conjuncture, the encounter, overdetermination, structural causality, and the like, Althusser's theory has an implicit commitment to its capacities for applicability, and in the present section we will demonstrate that *one* way we can read Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (2002) is as providing a textual ethnography that concretizes what Althusser develops about the nature of Dialectical Materialism at the level of structural analysis. This is not to argue that Benjamin does not contribute anything over and above this, nor that he and Althusser do not have their points of contention; rather, the point is that each convolute of the "*Passagenwerk*" can be fruitfully read as representing the study of what Althusser would call a particular conjuncture, where what we see Benjamin doing throughout his *magnum opus* is laying-bear the complex differential nature of the complex totality as it was described by Althusser. What each convolute of his tome provides is a set of concrete instantiations and examples that demonstrate the processes of overdetermination, determination in the last instance, the encounter, the conjuncture, etc. at work in the formation of bourgeois society during the reconstruction of Paris after the repression of the Paris Commune. The famed ambiguity of Benjamin's text, and the genius of his approach, lies in the very fact that he leaves the structural features that Althusser spends so much effort rendering explicit, implicit. Forming "constellations" or a "collage" out of the refuge of the trash-bin-scraps that he finds when sorting through the refuse produced by those who lived and created this very transformative period, Benjamin's master work represents a reconstruction, in a very concrete sense, of the ways that determination in the last instance and overdetermination operated in the production of the new conjuncture of capitalist society and encountering agency (Buck-Morss 2002). In this sense his book is performative, an exercise in indirect communication, an exercise that literally *shows* the reader the very same structures which we found Althusser to be *saying*. Thus, while Althusser focuses on bringing out the formal structures of Marx's Dialectical Materialism, leaving its application to actual cases buried, Benjamin focuses on applying this understanding of Dialectical Materialism as a complex totality to actual concrete cases, leaving the theoretical explication of the theory as something suppressed. So, what Althusser is doing on an abstract level, Benjamin is doing on a concrete level, with the two working with what is essentially the same theoretical understanding of Dialectical Materialism. This is the thesis of this present essay, and the goal of the remaining time here is to defend this position.

To mount this defense, we will focus on just two convolutes, though in theory this argument could be expanded to the entirety of the *Arcades Project*.[29] With this said we will focus on the convolute on "*The Interior*," or the birth of bourgeois home decor, and the convolute on *"Iron Construction*," or the birth of a bourgeois market-society. In conjunction with this we will refer to one of the more important and metalevel convolutes of the text, convolute N, entitled "*On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress*." Here we find Benjamin discussing his thoughts on Marxism, Dialectical Materialism, Economics, and the relation of these to lived-experience in a rather explicit and direct manner, and for these reasons we will use this section as a cipher for intimating Benjamin's own understanding of Dialectical Materialism (Jay 1993).

Section 1. The Interior

The modern household, or perhaps more proper for our context, the modern apartment or duplex, represents the creation of a radically new form of life, an emergent phenomenon whose genealogy Benjamin traces to the early to mid-19th century alongside the rise of bourgeois society. According to Benjamin how we furnish and style the inside of our home is by no means contingent or a result of mere happenstance. The majority of the convolute on "*The Interior*" represents an explication of what Benjamin calls the "logic of the interior." As he states, the entire household is sub-divided according to a specific genus/species structure whereby each room demands a certain assemblage of furniture and ornaments in order that it abides by the "semantics" of design immanent to the genus of that room (Buck-Morss 2002, Jay 1993).[30] In one section he makes mention of how a particular room can thus "demand" that we purchase a particular item in order to fulfill what he calls the "physiognomy" of that particular space. As he states, the interior is marked by a "set of demands" – where homeowners are said to literally feel the creeping need which gnaws at an individual until they purchase the right lamp for that corner there, or they acquire those drapes composed of the prober fabric for this window, or they finally purchase that set of specific knick-knacks that will be placed eternally on their mantle-place in permanently dead stasis (Convolutes H, I, K, L, T: Benjamin 2002).[31] When taken as a whole the interior of the household is thus referred to as a "well-crafted landscape," one whose overall purpose is designed to guide the gaze and kinesthetic perception of the individual as they grip and seize upon their dwelling. Each interior space of the dwelling (kitchen, foray, bathroom, dining room, etc.) offers its own horizon, and stands as a particular figure-ground pattern that has been prefabricated to impart a certain affect onto any agent who encounters it, forming an atmosphere and mood onto those who enter these spaces. In such luminous fashion Benjamin describes meticulously how the entrance-way of a household is infused with an added sense of significance and ceremony, serving as the threshold between the world and one's place of dwelling. Mockingly, or perhaps in a sense of ironic adoration, he recalls how the bourgeoisie household dictates that the entranceway be marked by an assemblage of items which we deprive of their use-value, a set of "things" reduced to a purely ceremonial and "semantic function." By collecting such "knick-knacks" and arranging them in accordance with a prefabricated pattern within our homes, Benjamin is describing the way

[29] Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project.* Harvard Belknap Press, MA. 2002. Referred to here in the footnotes as *AP*.
[30] *AP*. pp. 212-227.
[31] *Ibid.*

in which we mediate our relationships to the world in a manner that is uniquely distinct to bourgeoisie society (Buck-Morss 2002).[32]

The true brilliance of Benjamin's Marxism arises in how he manages to simultaneously relate this account of the interior to the processes of capitalism that have given rise to, motivated the desire for, and that have helped to sustain the very existence of this form of life known as *the bourgeoisie interior* (Convolutes H, I, K, L: Benjamin 2002). You design your interior space, I design mine, she designs hers, and he designs his, and we each do this under an aesthetic sensibility that is somewhat unique to each of us. Yet, beneath or behind this is a certain social-cultural logic of commodified interior decoration that predetermines the items which will comprise an individual's choice-set. This logic reflects the operations of production and commodification, the movements of consumerism, the manifestation of commodity fetishization, the play of class distinctions, and the unfolding effects of alienation and escapism as factors ultimately conditioning how we relate to our own interior spaces. These are different structures of economics that necessarily support and facilitate the birth of the modern interior and the social customs of interior design – regardless of what direction we might each take this. Interior design of our dwellings has grown out of the economic sphere of production, whilst existing for each agent as a sphere of overdetermining independence in its own right. In this manner we exist as structural effects, as economics and the social demands that create the conjuncture of interior design determine agents independent of their free will. And yet despite this, there remains room for our unique encounters with these structures as we each choose how we will design our own dwelling within a certain set of boundary conditions (Buck-Morss 2002).

Adding to this, Benjamin describes how our individually crafted interiors become a place of magical escape from the antagonisms of the exploitation of labor and the harsh realities of capital. In a rather poignant reference to this he discusses the bourgeoisie interior as possessing a certain "satanic calm," where the perfect orderly presentation of objects displaces a deeper inner-sense of lived-unrest produced by our daily requirement of leaving home and going into the busy sphere of capitalist society. Here the interior, while separated in one sense from capital and labor, is at another level distinctly wrapped up with economic considerations. As Benjamin explains in Convolutes I and K, it is in this manner that any form of adequate understanding of the interior must require that we understand and connect such discussions of the superstructural dynamics of interiors – magazines, advertisements, design trends, fashion and fads, the logic of different interior spaces, the varied play of commodification, the proliferation of design experts, etc. – back to the material developments of economics as such.[33] Much like with Althusser, Benjamin is here explicit in defending both the idea of *determination in the last instance*, *complex totality*, the *conjuncture*, the *encounter*, and the idea of *overdetermination*, and when taken together, the convolute on the interior reads as a literal concrete exemplification of the very structures we have just observed Althusser exemplifying at a formal level.

The logic of the interior operates and unfolds according to its own structural manifestation, functioning according to its own modal determinations, and its own play of forces, producing its

[32] The point is that though this account may bear some similarities to other periods or forms of the interior, what makes this form of interior distinct, namely the form of interior specific to bourgeoisie society, say from medieval society, is the unique confluence of structures, economic determinations, and overdeterminations that are specific to this epoch.

[33] *AP* pp. 212-227.

own set of antagonisms, and imputing upon the agent its own distinct forms of experience. And yet, we can see how the entire convolute presents exactly what Althusser was describing through the terms of the conjuncture and encounter since for both Althusser and Benjamin the emergence of the bourgeois citizen, approached at this level of structural causality, will be found to bear their own unique form of experiencing these elements. As such, this convolute on the interior forms just one element of the complex totality that is bourgeois society as it is *experienced* by x agent at y time (Convolutes I, K,T: Benjamin 2002). Each convolute in the massive *Arcades Project* covers a different sphere of structural determination, with the book as a whole quite literally mirroring back to us the complex totality of capitalism as it existed right after the destruction of the Paris Commune and at the dawn of the new consumer paradise that became the Paris defined by the transformations of Haussmannization.

Perhaps most importantly, we can see a strong similarity between Benjamin's and Althusser's understandings of the role and nature of economic determination. Benjamin is not saying that you can explain that ceremonial room in many large homes that nobody ever enters, let alone uses, by referring solely to capital, exploitation, and alienation. Rather, he is showing how such a universalized form of house decoration fits into a larger superstructural "form of life," namely that of the structures of bourgeoisie interion design as a sphere of activity that is modally conditioned in the last instance by economic determinations and the material substratum through which this overdetermination exists. Moreover, how all this will manifest in each home will form a distinct conjuncture unto itself, one which constructs a kaleidoscope of different forms of interior that one might encounter. In this manner we can read Benjamin as offering a concrete exemplification of the form of Dialectical Materialism we found in Althusser's structural analysis, and when taken together both can be seen as avoiding the vulgar reductionist readings of Marxism (reductivism, economism, volunteerism, determinism, etc.), whilst defending a form of site-specific Marxian analysis that allows for agentive choice and free variation.

Section 2. Iron Construction

In the convolute on "*Iron Construction*" this connection to Althusser becomes even more apparent. Here Benjamin goes into great detail, perhaps more than what the reader might desire, discussing the innovations of iron smelting and the differences of cast-iron, rot-iron, ingot-iron, riveting, bellows construction, and other technical developments in the raw materials and the instruments of production that occurred throughout the mid-19th century.[34] Because of this, this small convolute is by far one of the richest in the entire text. With the invention and improvements in the production of iron, architects were now able to explore new manners of construction and building. To this extent the expansion of iron in construction itself in turn allowed for an entirely new manner for utilizing glass, as with iron constructions glass was now able to be secured and fastened in manners that previously were barred to the material as it related to wooden or concrete frames. From this Benjamin expands on how with Iron comes an entire new sphere of possible modalizations of architecture – leading to the physical erection of an entirely new experiential form of life throughout Paris. Proceeding directly from innovations in the forces of production, Benjamin is able to describe how an entire new lifeworld of consumer capitalism was constructed. Unlike the limitations of stone, wood, and concrete, Iron provides for the construction of grand enclosed spaces that forms of architecture previously could not aspire to obtain (Buck-Morss

[34] *AP* pp. 150-170.

2002). Going into great levels of detail, Benjamin describes how this new architectural form literally remade the appearance of the landscape, creating an entirely new sense of one's perceptual horizon, while exploding the possibilities of experience available in capitalized cities – with this process literally remaking the phenomenology of capitalized experience (Buck-Morss 2002).

Thus, taking off in the 1850s there was a gigantic explosion of iron and glass structures, with everything from the Eiffel tower, to the Paris stock exchange, public libraries, garden houses, museums, the world-exhibitions and the crystal palace of Dostoevsky's underground man, emerging throughout the Parisian landscape, culminating in the very creation of the Arcade itself; remaking this city's landscape into a sea of iron and glass. From this account of the innovations in the forces of production, driven by the desire for surplus accumulation, a new material substratum of engineering and construction was born, and with this, a new form of life, and kind of agent – the urban shopping-district strewn bourgeois city and the consumerist, city-dwelling, agent.

As Benjamin describes in the case of the Arcades in particular, this new form of physical space literally helped to determine and create the new social space that has become the central marking feature of all cases of bourgeoisie society ever since – shopping. The deep existential novelty of the Arcades, according to Benjamin, rests in the fact that *it allowed for the creation of an iron and glass roof that could now stretch across and cover a previously open street*. With this architectural advancement for the first time a social space could be constructed such that it could stand outside the influence of the elements, weather, and seasons. Soon after within the first enclosures the roads beneath these glass domes began to quickly transform, changing from rutted mud and lose stone, to flat and polished marble and surfaces (Convolutes F, K, L, M, P, R: Benajmin 2002). With this change, these interior spaces now became dramatically less dirty, and as a result, more people began to wear nicer clothes on a daily basis, as their wears would see less negative exposure to the elements (e.g. muddy roads), thus extending the scope of their shelf-life and usability. With this increasingly sanitized environment cleanliness became incentivized as we see also the explosion of mirrored and reflective surfaces accompanying the birth of the Arcades. As with a clean environment, surfaces now had a chance to retain a sense of hygiene and luminosity that hitherto was not available when continuously exposed to the elements. With these changes came a more general transformation in our social norms and expectations. The Arcades became a region of social life unto itself, a shiny, reflective, and glistening environment that quickly began to attract large crowds of people due to its phenomenological novelty, and with this we see the birth of new types of activities and modes of agency – take Benjamin's analysis of the *flaneur* as exemplar of all this (Convolutes J, M, P: Benjamin 2002 and Buck-Morss 2002). Within the span of two decades there were hundreds of Arcades constructed across the landscape, dominating Paris, and with such novel spaces, the marketization and commodification of goods began to change. Here, in these enclosed, sanitized, spaces, shopping had become a central logic of operation. To stand out from other business we find that for the first time signage, a company's logo, display windows, and visual advertising each became important features of a business's environmental operation (Convolutes G, P, Q: Benjamin 2002). These alterations each in turn had a dialectical effect on altering consumerism, fetishization, commodification, and forms of agents' physiological shopping behavior. This form of analysis could continue on in this manner for pages, as it does in Benjamin, but to help intimate the true genius of his book, each of the topics I have just noted – marble floors, mirrored and reflective surfaces, crowds, the *flaneur*, fashion, markets, signs, advertising, display windows, the arcades, and so on – represents just a single topic to which Benjamin devotes an entire convolute in his *Arcades Project*. The point of the book's title, and the

basic goal of Benjamin's project in the broadest sense, was his desire to demonstrate how what occurs with the striking origination and development in the arcades in fact reflects a broader set of social transformations that defined the maturation of the modern bourgeoisie age and bourgeois subject. The strength of his text rests in how Benjamin is able to connect these social developments back to developments in the production process – and all without reductively taking developments of the economic base as exhaustive of explanations at the level of the social-superstructure.

In this manner if we read the *Arcades Project* through Althusser we can see how the two thinkers present a strikingly similar account of Dialectical Materialism. In the case of the nexus of developments that lead from iron construction to the *flanuer* as just discussed, the analysis Benjamin provides is similar in all the respects we found pertinent in our discussion of Althusser – overdetermination, the conjuncture, complex totality, process without a subject, determination in the last instance, the encounter, etc. The true wonder of Benjamin's book is the way in which it offers us an avenue to formulate a non-reductive reading of Marxism that still provides some sense of economic determinism. The ambiguity and curiosity which arises from the book is that it lacks a traditional structure or sense of purpose that can help readers understand just how these two commitments are held together. Looking, however, at Althusser's understanding of a differentiated complex totality and all that this entailed – namely, the three senses of determination in the last instance, overdetermination, the conjuncture, the encounter, interpellation, etc. – and we can begin to see how this style of analysis overlaps with Benjamin's work in such a manner that it helps provide the structural resources necessary to explain what it is exactly we see Benjamin doing at a concrete level of discussion.

Thus, we can say what Althusser is doing on a structural level, Benjamin is doing at the concrete level – where they are working from opposite ends of the spectrum with the same understanding of Dialectical Materialism. Thus, when read together they help illuminate the point of each other's project, where Benjamin provides the concrete analysis Althusser lacks, while Althusser provides the formal structural analysis that is lacking in Benjamin's work, and in this sense, when read together they reveal to us a very fertile strain of Dialectical Materialism.[35]

Part 3. Differences and a Gesture towards a Marxist Phenomenology

Before concluding we will help situate how this argument should be understood in order to be properly grasped by pointing out the proper scope of the above argument. The goal here has

[35] For a final example of this we can look at the convolute on "Fashion," where we see a striking picture of the interplay of economic determination and overdetermination at work in the structural constitution of a specific conjuncture-encounter of the superstructure. In one sense fashion is described as being directly correlated to economics. It is produced through a labor-process, it involves raw materials, instruments of production, it expresses class relations, it relates to commodification, it correlates to entire sets of industries, marketing campaigns, fetishizations, and so on. Yet over and above these determinations, Benjamin demonstrates how fashion as we live and experience it is itself also further determined by structures of sexualization, socialization, death and decay, self-expression, and the like. In his analysis these each represent distinct layers of conditioning, whereby each of these distinct registers demarcates a specific way in which the logic of fashion can be understood as dictated by structures of determination other than those of economics. Benjamin captures this by referring to the symbolic or theological dynamic of fashion, wherein fashion exists first and foremost in the social discourse between agents, though this is not to deny the importance of the economic framework that gives rise to and that supports the particular style of the bourgeois fetishization of fashion that is unique to the conjuncture and encounters of this epoch.

not been to argue that Benjamin and Althusser hold the exact same conception of Dialectical Materialism, nor have we argued that it is impossible that further analysis might discover some deeper incompatibility which prevents their full-bored comparison. The argument presented here has been that within the limited framework provided by our exposition of Althusser's interpretation of Dialectical Materialism, both he and Benjamin can be described as being in alignment. Both are describing capitalism in terms of *overdetermination*, and in terms of *economic determination* as here described. Both intrinsically relate this analysis to the concrete experience of lived agents, and both manage to balance a sense of economic determinism while retaining and justifying the possibility of pluralistic, non-economic interpretations of social phenomenon. Where they differ on this account rests in the fact that what one accomplishes at the theoretical level the other is able to accomplish in terms of concrete ethnographic analysis. This fact is in actuality what enables the one project to illuminate regions of the other that are denied to it, where their overlap only becomes apparent when the projects are so compared, and so while Benjamin provides examples that help remove the vagueness from Althusser's structuralist account, Althusser helps provide the structure that helps dissipate the ambiguity within Benjamin's concrete presentations! Here Althusser's methodological framework of complex totality and Benjamin's methodological framework of constellation converge.

Beyond this basic similarity there are countless cases of differences in their orientation, temperament, goals, senses of practice, views on history, and the like. For example, running throughout *The Arcades Project* is a commentary on dreams and the dream world, along with a lingering sense of the mystical and sacred which are at play in the creation of Benjamin's depiction of bourgeois society. This strain of Benjamin's thinking, found also in the essay on Mechanical Reproduction, and present as early as his habilitation on *German Tragic Drama*, reflects to us something seemingly foreign to Althusser's writings. The two differ again in what Nietzsche might call "philosophical temperament." The intrigues of party politics, the status of theory, and the presence of contemporary political concerns that plague Althusser are harder to find at times in Benjamin, who one might successfully argue desired more to be a thinker than to be a Marxist thinker. This helps perhaps to explain Benjamin's anathema to schematics, which contrasts with Althusser's open embrace of structural analysis. This list could go on, but these differences already pose enough interesting questions for us to consider. Why, where, and when do they differ? How do we account for the absences in one theorist from the point of view of the other? Might these differences run deeper than we have assumed? Such lines represent possible paths to pursue going forward, but if the general argument put forward here stands, then we need to think of Benjamin and Althusser as representing a distinct alternative account of Dialectical Materialism within the cannon of Western Marxism. Together they present, in strikingly similar though divergent manners, a way for us to interpret Marxism while avoiding reductionism, mechanism, and idealism, and maintaining a commitment to pluralism, all while still retaining a sense of economic determinism and revolutionary Marxism – a feat both thinkers accomplish by simultaneously re-orientating Marxism back to the spirit of Marx himself, namely to the demand that Marxism exists as a critical and revolutionary analysis of concrete lived-experience in distinct material situations.

With this comment I would like now to make the promised pass at a phenomenology of Marxism. Using the work of Althusser and Benjamin, we find ourselves with the conceptual resources necessary to connect the structural analysis of Marxist theory to the concrete phenomenological descriptions of lived-experience. In this manner the conjuncture, overdetermination, the encounter, and the like help us understand how phenomenology and

Dialectical Materialism might be brought into contact, and at this stage this process can begin by rooting Marxism in lived-experience as these two authors have done themselves. Capital is structurally understood, but it is lived by agents as they engage with complex conjunctures of varying elements, acting as freely motivated individuals, where at bottom what needs to be explained and described is the existence of capitalism as we each *experience it*. Thus, out of the work of these two authors, a Marxism of the *lebenswelt* could begin to be developed. This would function through a description of how the nesting of intentional accomplishments correlates with the rubric of determination in the last instance, overdetermination, the conjuncture, the encounter, interpellation, structural effectuations, etc., in formation of our own experience of a capitalized world – whether this be shopping, our homes, our experience walking around a city, our being at work, and so forth. As Benjamin and Althusser have done here, we need to bring Marx's analysis together with an account of the distinct conjunctures wherein capitalism is lived as the experience we have of it. For it is here, in understanding the unique phenomenological experience of capital, that Benjamin and Althusser converge, and together they give us the tools to begin constructing a *messy materialism of the lebenswelt* that defines capitalism as the unique anthropological form of life by which we know it each moment of our lives.

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ISSN 1097-3087
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