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*Unusual Humean issues in  
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**Andrea Micocci**



# Unusual Humean issues in materialistic political economy

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**Abstract:** Capitalism as we know it presents typical dialectical features that isolate it from nature, in which real oppositions make evolution revolutionary: A dialectical metaphysics replaces the free flow of events allowing capitalist relationships but preventing the practice of materialism. Some radically sceptical issues in Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and *A Treatise of Human Nature* come useful here. A materialistic approach with complete (i.e., non-dialectical) ruptures in fact dovetails with Hume's argument on the unpredictability of nature and the predictability of human social activities. As a consequence, a thus renewed materialistic political economy concerned with the concrete must work out its own categories dynamically, to discard them once they have been proved metaphysical.

**Keywords:** methodology, dialectics, Marxism

## Introduction [1]

The present paper deals with questions concerning the use of materialism in understanding, and intervening upon, capitalism in the spirit of Marx's Thesis XI on Feuerbach (Marx 1985, p.123). In particular, the dynamic use of the categories of materialistic, though not necessarily Marxist political economy will be considered. First of all, the salient features of the relevant theoretical work in the field will be recalled, to then move on to discuss some aspects of Hume and the importance of his Epicurean (and perhaps Stoic, but this is less momentous for us here) Scepticism for a materialism that can change reality rather than merely interpret it.

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The goal of the present discussion is to contribute towards a 'dynamic' approach to the identification and use of the economic — and, given the multidisciplinary character of materialistic political economy — social, political and anthropological variables that are needed to represent and change reality. It shall be argued that in 'capitalism as we know it' such variables are understood in theory, and used in practice, as metaphysical concepts deriving from the dominant culture and as simulacra of the material items themselves. If Hume's scepticism is correct, it shall be shown that what was just said implies that the participants to, and students of, the economy do not know, nor indeed can they know, whether they are ever able to directly grasp the actual material: the concrete. This paradox is the central concern of the present paper, for its methodological consequences on political economy.

The connection between the economic setup with its social, institutional and cultural features and the means whereby we represent reality in political economy prevents capitalist individuals from ever proving that they have at last gained a hold of the material. Here lie the paradoxical features of the materialistic 'dynamism' in political economy proposed in the present paper: concepts, categories and connections can only be identified to be then discarded once their metaphysical nature of intellectual contrivances, i.e., of simulacra of actual material items consonant with the dominant culture, has been worked out. A la Hume of the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739, p.262), liberty (from capitalism and its culture, in our case) can be equated with letting reality develop on its own.

In what follows, it shall be argued that the continuous activity of detached theoretical creation and destruction proposed here is emancipative. It allows the creation of what Marx called, in the *German Ideology* (1846, p. 54-60), the *extraneous standards* that are necessary to view history from outside, in order to be able to both interpret and change it. The materialistic process proposed in what follows can be called a revolution. It aims to pose individuals outside the dominant economic setup by operating outside its cultural and intellectual schemes. By keeping individuals aloof from any socially enforced economic and cultural framework, it guarantees independence of judgement and capacity never to adapt. Yet, as it shall be argued, Hume suggests the method's revolutionary dynamism does not prevent any actual practical use of the existing capitalist categories.

What said so far means that this paper shall not refer to that which the Hume economists are used to discussing, well summarized for instance in Schalas/Wennerlind (2011). It shall instead directly refer to Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

(1779), and *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739). In these works Hume poses his Skeptical and empiricist challenge to science (1748 and 1739) and indirectly explains the Epicurean character of such challenge (1779 and 1748). The argument here presented shall not, however, seek to stick to the letter of what Hume says, for this is a job of little utility here much better left to those who are qualified for such task (see e.g. Tooley, 2011). Rather, Hume's ideas shall be used as a starting point for moving on to considerations concerning materialistic political economy. This implies that there shall be no need to directly engage the present-day Hume literature, such as for instance the *New Hume Interpretation* (Wright 1983, Strawson 1989, Read et al. 2000) that supposes that real causal connections exist among external objects, of which the human mind is unable to conceive.

The next section gives a necessarily brief account of the general materialistic research framework adopted here, of its results in terms of conceptualizing 'human understanding' in 'capitalism as we know it', and, as a consequence, in terms of defining what materialism in political economy is about.

Section 3 is the direct discussion of Hume's works. They shall be interpreted as general philosophical questions in a modern mode. That means that they shall be read in a fashion which might well prove somehow unfaithful to Hume, Skeptical philosophy and Epicurus, and different from most present-day interpretations. The goal is that of complementing and strengthening the materialistic approach summarized in section 2.

Section 4 puts together what has been presented and discussed in the preceding sections. The result is the outline of a materialistic theory of human understanding in the social sciences that coincides with a revolutionary process of theoretical and emancipator 'creative destruction'. Materialistic political economy, rather than a positive or normative discipline, becomes a dynamic tool to continuously understand in novel fashion and, as a consequence, continuously challenge social and economic reality.

The conclusions emphasize the cultural fetters capitalism poses upon all intellectual endeavours of understanding. Only a dynamic political economy can be a revolutionary tool that frees us from such capitalist fetters, compelling us to be creative.

A number of consequences follow from this whole reasoning; first of all concerning conventional Marxist theories of revolution. The idea behind the present paper is that you cannot fight metaphysics with metaphysics: liberation is the search

for the concrete, which is not to be found in capitalism by capitalist means. The misconceived objects capitalist individuals deal with in practice, i.e., the metaphysics that replaces material reality itself, are compelling enough to keep capitalism as we know it going, however hard some of such individuals would like to oppose it. Here the common sense reading usually attributed by economists to Hume, whose champion is (rightly or wrongly) taken to be Keynes (see for instance Carabelli 1988, Chick/Dow 2001, Dow/Hillard 1995), shows how easy preserving capitalism is (though such discussions are beyond the scope and aim of the present paper). Capitalism can only be 'exited' intellectually if we want to dispose of it, i.e., if materialist philosophy must be able to interpret as well as change reality as suggested by Marx's Thesis XI on Feuerbach.

## Materialism and capitalism

The present section summarizes Micocci (2002, 2009/2010, 2012), which develops, to then depart from, Colletti's and della Volpe's return to the importance of Kant for a logically sound materialism. Della Volpe's scientific alternative (della Volpe 1980) as well as Colletti's critical impasse, eventually leading him to abandon philosophy and enter practical political activity with the political right, are both rejected on the grounds of the need to put materialism on 'naturalistic' bases. The term dialectics is used in what follows in the 'normal' (statistically speaking) sense of that literature.

In order to define materialism in political economy for the purposes of this paper, it is necessary to start from Marx. In the Preface to his Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy (1859) (Marx/Engels 1975) Marx confesses that his doubts about political economy could be solved only by first of all going through a 'critical review of the Hegelian philosophy of right' (Marx/Engels 1975, p.181), thus (famously) learning that '*the anatomy of civil society is to be sought in political economy*' (ibid.).

It follows that

'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' (ibid.).

But

'mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve [...] [because] the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation' (1975, p.182).

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the issues of dialectics/non-dialectics related to the anti-Hegelian stance ensuing (for just a meaningful instance) from Marx's Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State (1843, in Marx, 1992) [3]. It is nonetheless necessary to summarize those complex issues by starting from Marx's considerations in the above Preface. Consciousness is socially determined and is circumscribed within that set of things that can only be done within the capitalist mode of production [4] (Marx 1859, 1843, Colletti 1974, 1975, della Volpe 1980, Rosenthal 1998, Micocci 2002, 2009/2010). The argument on what (the metaphysics of) 'capitalism as we know it' (Micocci, 2009/2010) amounts to can now be introduced, thus signalling the indebtedness to Marx of the present argument.

The above type of literature argues, with various degrees of radicalism, that it is possible to read Marx in an anti-Hegelian fashion. From such perspective, the dialectical character of 'capitalism as we know it' mirrors the dialectics of political economy and of mainstream economics (see above all della Volpe 1980, Micocci 2002, 2009/2010. For a mainstream argument that comes to similar conclusions see Barkley Rosser 2000). Also, most brands of Marxism usually allow for dialectical relationships of the Hegelian type only (for a critical discussion see della Volpe 1980, Colletti 1974, 1975, Micocci 2002, 2009/2010, 2012).

For instance, with his Feuerbach-based critique of Hegel himself in his early writings (collected in Marx, 1992) and of Proudhon (Marx, 1846; see especially chapter 2, aptly titled 'The Metaphysics of Political Economy'), Marx himself exemplified the mistake of an acritical application of simplified Hegelian categories. In fact the ruptures needed to cause a historical break (a change of mode of production) can be produced only by allowing for the presence of Kantian real oppositions (Colletti 1974, 1975, Micocci 2002, 2009/2010). These are possible in nature and in history. They go to constitute the needed ruptures with disappearance that characterize evolution.

In fact, nature (the concrete) functions and evolves by dialectical means as well as by Kantian real oppositions (ruptures with disappearance) [5]. Natural and historical evolutions (take the disappearance of the dinosaurs, or the Middle Ages – capitalism rupture, for two powerful instances) depend upon breaks, ruptures with disappearance: we shall call them revolutions here. The consequences of this methodological approach are different from much of political economy, as outlined below.

In order to keep to its dialectical functioning, capitalism must deny the presence of such 'ruptures with disappearances' that occasionally, but meaningfully, take place in the concrete. As a consequence, it can only base itself upon an overarching intellectual construction (a human understanding) that reads everything in terms of dialectical relationships (Micocci, 2009/2010). This entails (Micocci, 2002, 2009/2010) that a metaphysics is produced, in which material items are replaced – in thought as well as in actual relationships - by their mediated, dialectical concepts. Things and thoughts thus appear to share a metaphysical, dialectical nature, and everything is transformed into reciprocally homogeneous and communicable concepts. Everything can be mediated and interacted with, from religion and ideology to class struggle, to commodities, to science, to natural things.

Inevitably, the *a priori* self-contained and intellectual basis of the metaphysics of capitalism is constantly in danger of being punctured by the intrusion of the concrete, whose occasional non-dialectical features could cause in it ruptures with disappearances (see Micocci, 2009/2010). Capitalism is in other words compelled to continuously protect its metaphysical isolation from the concrete. This entails psychological and intellectual (hence cultural) consequences. The all pervading metaphysics makes capitalism a place ridden by a continuous sense of inadequacy to the dangers and impending disasters that the concrete out there - which is, however, perceived as metaphysics as well - produces without warning.

Such situation is complemented and enhanced by the fact that capitalism continuously undergoes actual internal processes of apparent struggle (e.g., of firms, classes, ideas, human-induced natural disasters). Being dialectical, however, such struggles always re-combine the elements, i.e., in the language of Hegelian dialectics (Rosenthal 1998), the determinations that are involved in them. Nothing can completely disappear, i.e., no revolution in the sense above introduced is possible. Capitalism's continuous conflictive processes, despite being egregiously moderate (in that they are dialectical), nonetheless give, in such intellectual environment, the wrong impression of being life-or-death clashes, further contributing to the iterative [6] mediation (Micocci 2009/2010, 2012) that capitalism as we know it amounts to.

For a fundamental instance, market competition in reality and in mainstream theory, as well as in much political economy, is not a thing whereby non-efficient firms disappear for good (Micocci, 2009/2010). Rather they are iteratively re-absorbed and re-proposed in slightly different (dialectically produced) guises, or they operate in imperfect competition, or in market niches, always improving/ worsening efficiency but forever unable to be efficient in a final sense and win the



game. This goes to the advantage of the better off classes, which, in a framework of perfect competition, would see their advantage melt if efficiency and equilibrium were reached. In such cases, we would in fact witness either a 'stationary state' (as proposed by John Stuart Mill, 1848, Book IV, ch.VI) or marginal profits being zero (mainstream economic equilibrium, with its static nature), or an equalization of profit rates in all sectors. That would spell the end of 'capitalism as we know it'.

In other words, on the one hand the intellectual homogeneity between capitalism as we know it, mainstream economics and political economy makes a perfect market (a place with ruptures and disappearances) still imaginable. On the other, it entrusts to the market's actual material incapacity to ever produce ruptures (Kantian real oppositions) the task of keeping to its role of object corresponding to a non-realistic theory. Thus in capitalism we get the vast literature on the difference between perfect market and reality [7], while the logical mistakes of the theory identified by the anti-Hegelian approach here proposed are inevitably overlooked. Another instance: in the capitalist perception natural disasters can always be overcome by technological innovation.

The same applies to political endeavours. No 'otherness' (alternative positions impossible to mediate, as said in note 6. See also Micocci 2012) is envisaged. Only diversity appears possible, or the dialectical game could not be played. Intolerance disguised as mediation ensues, while true toleration (acknowledgement of the impossibility to mediate between two items 'other' to each other) simply disappears from the intellectual and communication horizons in practice. All intellectual (hence social, political and economic) activities come down to (intolerant) operations of mediation, enhancing the above-mentioned feeling of impending danger caused by the continuous struggles ensuing from the compulsion to mediate.

This situation can also be represented as a metaphysics whose main defining feature is the incapacity to distinguish between the concrete and the abstract (della Volpe 1980, Colletti 1974, 1975, Micocci 2002, 2009/2010). Such intellectually crippled metaphysics is all one needs in 'capitalism as we know it'. Its logically flawed character is well represented by the telling instance of the role held by money (Rosenthal 1998, Micocci 2002, 2009/2010, 2012, 2011a, 2011b, 2010) as a symbol of the reciprocal recognition by individuals of their common belonging to the system [8]. Capitalism (we can even describe it, with Marx - see for instance 1859, in 1975, p.181 - as the relations of production with their relative superstructure) is homogeneously metaphysical, or it cannot be. Abstract theory and concrete things can only, if and when ever acknowledged and understood, destroy it.

If such homogeneously limited and limiting, intellectually contrived metaphysical world is mirrored [9], as shown above, by the hypostatizing metaphysics of economics and political economy, these last are a most appropriate tool to represent, and interact with capitalism, as we know it. They can grasp and use metaphysics, and never transcend it [10]. They are perfectly consonant to capitalism itself.

The social sciences as well as capitalism itself act in the metaphysics, thus ensuring the continuation of the whole capitalist setup. As a consequence, materialism (the study of the concrete) becomes impossible, for capitalist individuals can only see the metaphysical items they intellectually contrive along the limited and limiting patterns of capitalist intellectuality (i.e., of capitalism itself in general, with its flawed dialectical intellectuality). They have the intuition and the need to reach the concrete and the abstract, but they cannot do so without abandoning the metaphysics.

A materialist social scientist is thus compelled in practice, rather than to deal with the concrete, to strip the objects he/she wants to deal with of their metaphysics, the crust that makes them capitalist objects rather than the actual material thing. But the question is: how can he/she be sure of having reached the bare material? The process of 'historicizing' the concrete, which most scholars attribute to Marx, cannot take place. We are out of touch with one of its necessary terms, the concrete, unless we break out of capitalism's metaphysics. In order to be able to call ourselves materialists we need a sceptical box of tools.

In conclusion, in capitalism individuals are caught in an intellectual trap (the metaphysics) that prevents their understanding from going beyond the metaphysics itself. Materialism then is the struggle to get free from this condition by first of all applying a non-dialectical scepticism open to the possibility of unpredictable ruptures with disappearances. The materialists can only doubt, at every step they take, of their understanding. This squares with Hume's (Epicurean) Scepticism [11].

## **Hume on materialism**

The present section aims at presenting an argument that complements and strengthens the preceding discussion. Hume here is just the most explicit author in a line that comprises Francis Bacon and Epicurus among others (see Micocci, 2002, 2009/2010). A number of arguably bold interpretations shall therefore be presented that serve as a springboard for the discussion of political economy in the

next section. The thorough engagement with Hume and the literature about him must necessarily be deferred to a larger publication, already under way (Micocci, in preparation).

To this paper's purposes, Hume's argument starts (1748, in 2008, p.12) by distinguishing the perceptions of the mind in two categories:

'The less forcible and lively are commonly denominated THOUGHTS or Ideas' (emphasis in the original). The other species, though wanting of a name, he calls 'IMPRESSIONS' (p.13, emphasis in the original): hear, see, feel, love, hate, desire, will. Yet, 'though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty [...] it is really confined to [...] the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded by the senses and experience' (ibid.). '[...] all our ideas [...] are copies of our impressions.'

The problem then is to check whether in Hume impressions can deceive mankind as to the reality of what they see, hear, desire and will. We will then develop this point and its consequences towards a direction that is rather general in the long tradition of sceptical (and materialistic) philosophy. To our purposes here, Hume is simply the thinker who put this set of questions in the most radical and explicit way to political economy purposes. The objects of human reason '*may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, Relations of Ideas, and Matters of Fact*' (p.18, emphasis in the original).

The former kind is best represented by the mathematical disciplines; the latter are less internally (mind you, internally only) consistent. One can, for a famous instance, as easily conceive of the Sun as raising and not raising tomorrow morning. This is quite uncontroversial for Hume's readers.

But the serious problem in both kinds of human reason is that if abstract thoughts come from impressions, senses and experience, as above stated, then even mathematics and logics, though internally coherent, might be misguided. In fact (to keep to the capitalist case as explained in the preceding section), if senses and intellect are nurtured in a capitalist environment ruled by the flawed exclusive logic of dialectical relationships, then inevitably whatever is built rests upon a limited and limiting understanding of reality: thought compounding, transposing, etc., the materials afforded by sense and experience. Even the laws of mathematics and logics might simply compound and transpose a flawed – in the case of capitalism as we know it – metaphysics. Causation, for instance, in such a case might well

be completely topsy-turvy if we are lucky, and more often simply unredeemable muddled [12].

Hume also notices that there might be exceptions to this hopeless slavery to customs and circumstances. At times, the human mind can indeed come up with a completely new idea. But 'this instance is so singular, that [...] does not merit, that for it alone we should alter our maxim' (p.15). The result is, simply, that we cannot be sure of anything we see empirically, and we should also be wary of abstract reasoning. Both are the children of our limited and limiting brain and senses. Hume claims that he is only talking to scientists, and 'must be judged by the FEW [who have] often thought of them [the theoretical issues, AM]' (p.134, emphasis in the original). Common people and common life can, in other words, go on as if nothing were the matter. This is obviously very important for political economy purposes. Nobody can demonstrate that 'the course of nature must continue uniformly the same, and that the future must be conformable to the past' (p.138). This, by the way, is the part of Hume's work that Keynes is said by some to have developed in his own economic work: see Carabelli (1988). Its application is evident for instance in Keynes (1936), Book IV, chapter 12. As a consequence of the above, for Hume 'Tis not, therefore, reason, which is the guide of life, but custom' (p.139).

In Hume's famous example, one can guess the movement of a billiard ball hit by another ball, and even win the game. Yet the game has not been won by a knowledge of the laws of nature, but rather by a '*belief*' that the ball will move as the player has come to expect by custom. But 'I can always conceive of the contrary' (ibid.) of any demonstration, 'however strong the proof may be from experience'. The same power of custom is repeated (p.140).

Hume continues (this is his Abstract of the book) by stating that 'the philosophy contain'd in this book is very sceptical and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding' (p.142). This is evidently a defence against possible accusations of being a materialist, i.e., an Epicurean, and as a consequence an atheist. But there is little doubt that he is an Epicurean: leaving to nature the freedom to even have no logic at all can only come from an Epicurean conception of the world as the casual collision of atoms. But even if he were not an Epicurean this point remains worth pursuing, regardless of the precision of the interpretation. Hume continues acknowledging the need (p.143) to find some 'expedient' to reconcile philosophy and common sense (may it be recalled that he had left common sense to common people and to non scientific and non philosophical endeavours).

Before moving on to the considerations developed in (1779), and hence to apply what discussed here to the social sciences, we need to dwell on what Hume says in Section XI. He notices (p.104) that:

'In works of human art and contrivance, it is allowable to advance from the effect to the cause, and returning back from the cause, to form new inferences concerning the effect [...] [because] man is a being, whom we know by experience, whose motives and designs we are acquainted with, and whose projects and inclinations have a certain connexion and coherence [...] When, therefore, we find, that any work has proceeded from the skill and industry of man [...] we can draw a hundred inferences concerning what may be expected from him' (pp.104-105).

But

'The case is not the same with our reasonings from the works of nature' (ibid.).

What Hume is saying here, to put it in modern language, is, precisely because of all that has been said above, how man reasons and his framework for analysis can be known: the actual, social man is entirely predictable, unlike nature. Hence, to our purposes here, political economy can be pursued, to meaningful results [13]. Indeed, it is a dismal science: it is the study of that miserable, rigid and predictable thing called man in society. This is a central point to the purposes of the present paper. What so far presented squares with the main characteristics of 'capitalism as we know it' that have been shown in section 2. There is very little need, as a consequence, to engage the Hume literature here. It is possible to turn to a more political economy oriented discussion.

A fundamental quotation from Hume (1739) can be now introduced, which perfectly completes what we have been describing so far, requiring no comment or explanation: 'All these objects [...] we call one cause and the other effect [...] are as distinct and separate from each other as any two things in nature, nor can we ever, by the most accurate survey of them, infer the existence of one from the other. 'Tis only from experience and the observation of their constant union, that we are able to form this inference; and even after all, the inference is nothing but the effects of custom on the imagination' (1739/2011, p.261, emphasis in the original). He continues (ibid.) that the constant union of cause and effect, i.e., their idea [...] is not discover'd by a conclusion of the understanding, but is merely a perception of the mind'.

His Epicurean conclusions from the above are formidable and help towards the task of the present paper: '[...] necessity makes an essential part of causation; and consequently liberty, by removing necessity, removes also causes, and it is the very same thing as chance' (p.261-262).

Hume scholars might want to intervene in many and diverse ways on the present use of such a statement. However, the point here is not to discuss Hume *per se*, but to show that his present statement is logically connected with his other ideas and fits the materialistic approach here proposed. The validity of this Humean possibility for materialist political economy would remain even if it were possible to prove that Hume was not the Skeptical Epicurean he seems to be from the above interpretation. Given the scope and aim of this paper, discussions of the literature that would detain us without adding to the logical argument can therefore be again foregone.

To complete this section it is worth briefly considering Hume (1779), which in its very structure and mode of arguing almost unguardedly features his Epicureanism, introducing a few important themes and confirming and reiterating what he says in (1748). In Part 1 he compares the force of nature to the power (Skeptical, in this case) of the mind; the latter is defeated by the need to conform. Part 2 discusses the impossibility to go from single cases to the whole, i.e., the danger of thinking in the limited terms we have discussed above. Part 3 warns of the logical impropriety of transferring the prerogatives of the human mind to the mind of any God, Christian or Pagan. Parts 4 and 5 discuss the imperfection of the senses and the dangers of attributing rationality to the deity. This is complemented by Part 6, which warns of the danger of bestowing nature with a human rationality.

Parts 7 and 8 are after naturalism; Part 9 therefore warns against *a priori* metaphysics and the straightforward application of mathematics. The rest builds up to Part 11, a Skeptical and Epicurean statement on the non-existence of the Christian God and of nature's benevolence/maleficence. Part 12 brings in the issue of analogy, conceived as all there is in normal and orthodox reasoning. Part 12 also contains an almost explicit confession of Epicureanism, in the form of an *excusatio non petita*.

By way of conclusion to this section it is worth going back to (1748, p.119), to propose a further difficulty. While discussing mathematical issues, Hume says: '[...] any difficulty in these decisions, it proceeds entirely from the undeterminate meaning of words, which is corrected by juster definitions.'

It has been remarked that Hume only discussed meaning in terms of ideas and impressions and their logical relations. This is fine, but the present argument simply needs to show that the issue of investigating words that often replace the investigation of actual objects, so forcefully put forward by Epicurus, (see Micocci, 2009/2010) was made his own by Hume. It can therefore be generalized as follows. While in mathematics *juster* definitions can be contrived, the same cannot be done in any other field, as shown by all that has been said so far. Now our argument can go back to political economy and materialism in the modern sense.

## Materialism as revolution

It is inevitable to start from what appears to be the most important difficulty that the preceding discussion leads to: the *undeterminate* meaning of words, and the need for *juster definitions*. Hume's solution is confined to mathematics, due to the abstract (in the sense of 'relations of ideas') character of this last subject, with the added hope determined by the odd possibility that entirely new ideas could occasionally be conceived by some special human minds. As the paper's problem is that of breaking out of the cultural fetters of 'capitalism as we know it' in a materialistic, i.e., revolutionary sense, a more general solution is needed.

Indeed, this last question is the very hub of the network of issues that have been proposed so far. To work out a general argument from which a solution could spring, there are three possibilities:

1. Rely upon those rare entirely new ideas whose possibility Hume envisages. This is the most aleatory possibility. To help this possibility it can only be hoped of nurturing original creations by pursuing the emancipation of the minds through other means. This leads to the next points.
2. There is also the need to resort to non-capitalist logical tools, which would in turn help the mental emancipation of point 1. This is a process that can be started by going back to whatever is extant from the preceding modes of production. The goal is to free capitalist individuals - at least in part - from the limited and limiting capitalist mentality by means of a double effort to imagine and penetrate the ancient mind and to put the ancient concepts to good, revolutionary and modern use. The principle of non-contradiction (see della Volpe 1980, Micocci 2002) is a well-known and relevant example of what we can gain by using ancient logics in all fields.

3. Finally, there is the need to systematically and continuously pursue knowledge through a sceptical, i.e., not necessarily Skeptical in the ancient sense, methodology that allows for seeing both the intrinsic variability and uncertainty of the material world (vs. the fatuous and rash capitalist belief that the natural and the social sciences can give order and hence predictability to nature and to social reality) and the intrinsic lack of variability of the social, economic and cultural world of 'capitalism as we know it'. This last, being a part of what Hume calls '*works of human art and contrivance*', is fully predictable in its laws and patterns of behaviour, for we are *acquainted* with its *motives, designs, projects*, and their *connexions* and *coherence*, and we can draw a *hundred inferences*, unlike what we can do with the work of nature. But all this is still subject to the rules of uncertainty (Micocci 2005). Our *inferences* are all correct, but still of the *hundreds* that can be drawn only one will come true and one can rarely tell which. It must be kept in mind that uncertainty in this framework does not mean variability; even less originality and unpredictability. It simply is the result of the iterative combination of well known and limited circumstances and patterns. In other words, uncertainty in social, political and economic reality as described by Hume, similarly to what presented in section 2 does not take the probabilistic form that is often found, for instance, in the theory of economics and finance. Rather, of all the possible combinations of the items involved, the most likely is the one that best responds intellectually to the cultural (fashionable) reasoning of its limited time of action. Nonetheless, there still is the possibility that non-fashionable combinations take place, creating a 'new' cultural combination (fashion). This last is neither new nor revolutionary, but simply the result of a peculiar re-combination of the given items. Capitalism and its metaphysical dream of free competition are not the 'creative' place they are made out to be by mainstream theory, and even by some Marxists.

Here comes, emancipation-wise, the importance of Hume's 'liberty as chance'. Material reality comprising capitalist social and economic structures must be left free to develop on its own, i.e., with its own lack of predictability, without metaphysical shackles.

From the three points above descends that great confusion is present in economics and political economy concerning the issue of potentiality. The already mentioned idea of perfect competition is for instance challenged to its core, as is the idea of



innovation, to give just two of the most popular concepts economists rave in favour and against [14]. As explained in section 2, 'capitalism as we know it' is a world where nothing can disappear and 'otherness' is impossible. Therefore, market efficiency is but one of those ideas that, as Hume allowed, could potentially come about, but do not *merit to alter* the general and implicitly shared idea that only what is known is possible, and that, to put it with Marx, the capitalist mind deals with '*only such tasks as it can solve*'.

This leaves us with the issue of *words* and *juster* definitions apparently unresolved. In 'capitalism as we know it' individuals can only conceive of words, definitions and alternatives that are already in the air and that being so, can neither innovate nor help towards precision. In fact, precision can and must inevitably be 'other' to anything 'capitalism as we know it' can intellectually produce, i.e., as explained in section 2 and here, contrive within its limited and limiting dialectical general mind (its metaphysics) with its continuous re-combination and mediation of known items.

All materialist political economists can do in practice is to pursue what suggested in points 1, 2, and 3 above, hoping to progress towards a direct relationship with material reality. While for Hume this matter can be put in the Stoic terms of the pursuit of facts vs. the comparison of terms in the Aristotelian tradition, and of the difference between words and propositions, in materialistic political economy a more modern set of concepts and criteria is needed. To these the paper presently turns.

In order to progress towards clarity and precision in the use of terms [15] (which from now on shall replace Hume's own *words*) it is necessary to go back to the question introduced in section 2 of the difference between the perfectly open world of nature and the exclusively dialectical and intellectual character of capitalism as we know it. Such a division is very similar to what we find in Hume because it is informed by the same Epicurean background (Micocci, 2009/2010). A world of infinite and even catastrophic unpredictability is contrasted with a subset of it: capitalism as we know it. In this last only uncertainty as the (iterative) re-combination of circumstances is allowed, by intellectual decree and by the common practice that ensues from it [16]. The point of science and of materialism in particular must therefore be emancipation from this very intellectual framework that permeates every aspect of capitalist life.

Finding precise terms amounts to identifying the material objects that correspond to them and, although this looks easier because it can apparently be faced in the same

way as Hume faced mathematics, the abstract categories of theory. Both things, however, in our capitalist days are tied in ways that Hume could not foresee and which are well beyond what he could worry about: they are precisely those things that capitalism cannot deal with, due to its metaphysical character caused by its dialectical nature described in section 2. What looked like a fairly normal task in Hume's own times has become the cyclopic endeavour of recovering the concrete and the abstract by going beyond the metaphysics, i.e., capitalism (as we know it) itself.

The revolutionary nature of the task of identifying concrete and abstract categories should not scare the capitalist individual however, for it is a well-known item in philosophical discussions of all ages. As mentioned at the end of section 3, Epicurus himself warned about it when he recommended avoiding mistaking investigations about words for investigations about things (see Micocci, 2009/2010). Also, it certainly does not affect capitalist intellectual debates, because these are so exclusively metaphysical as to be unable to notice, let alone grasp, these types of issues. This is precisely the main problem: capitalism as we know it and the practice of materialism in the form of identifying the concrete and the abstract are incompatible and incommunicable. One is alternative to the other: if one exists, the other cannot exist. This is the reason why materialism is revolutionary [17].

There is, as a consequence, the danger that what is suggested by Hume, i.e., the division of labour between common people who need not bother with such issues ('capitalism as we know it' itself in our case) and the intellectuals (the revolutionaries) who instead concern themselves with them, becomes a very difficult issue. While this difference can also be seen as a division of labour within each individual (who can think like an intellectual and act as a common person while revolutionary thought evolves), the practical question remains of transforming correct materialistic thinking into normal practice. Such an issue is well beyond the scope and aim of the present paper. It suffices to say here that the solution might depend on how collective the process is.

Let us now turn to the technical consequences on political economy of everything that has been argued so far. Differently from the natural sciences, a materialist political economy deals with some material categories – which, it is well worth reminding, in capitalist reality do not act as such but after they have been mediated by the metaphysics – as well as social and cultural categories, which are tied to the predictability (within capitalist uncertainty, as above defined) of human capitalist behaviour. A *hundred inferences* can be drawn, which means that generalizations are possible. In other words it can be told how a human aggregate behaves, very

much differently from the basic Epicurean uncertainty of natural events. Certainly nature can wipe away human aggregates and ideas, but as long as they exist observers can generalize about them. Economic disciplines are dismal in a sense different from what Carlyle meant: they are sad because they describe human beings alienated [18] by an all-pervasive metaphysics.

The only way to practise political economy, as a consequence, is by means of a historical approach, as Marx had proposed for the right reasons. But, surprisingly, in the general framework so far outlined materialistic political economy becomes a self-consuming enterprise: due to the emancipative (revolutionary) character of the materialistic method, it can only produce items to then necessarily discard them. Indeed, political economy itself exists in that capitalism exists: once capitalism is disposed of we shall no longer need the historical method of political economy for understanding reality. We shall instead likely need a planning method devoid of socialized and socializing features.

It is necessary then to see in some detail the process of the creation and disposal of the categories (variables, terms) of political economy, and its revolutionary role. The first problem would be that of the historical generalizations that would be necessary to define the various categories that must be explored. Exploring categories is the same thing as identifying their concrete nature, which means uncovering the metaphysical veil that transcends them into 'capitalist' items. This is a most important and difficult moment.

Hume's considerations go to strengthen the approach of our second section above, helping base it not just on a controversial 'Kantian' Marx but also on the Western Skeptical and Epicurean traditions. They in fact help see that if capitalism is what is described in section 2 it cannot be known for sure that what has been identified corresponds to the concrete. If human understanding can only *compound, transpose, augment* and *diminish the material afforded by the senses and experience* one is caught in a vicious circle. Whatever can be identified by means of the 3 steps method above delineated is bound to be limited and befuddled by the fact that our *senses and experience* are a full part of the capitalist general dialectical metaphysics: its intellectuality. Even truly new ideas could be hidden or distorted by this general capitalist darkness.

All that can be done is keep going at it, identifying (or creating, in the case of abstract thinking) a category, in order to then use it as a springboard to go beyond it. Materialists must operate as if they had never progressed: what they can and

must do is keep discarding and replacing what is found, seeking to return political economy to the unpredictability of material reality (the concrete). But what method must be used in order to identify our abstract and concrete categories [19]?

Both the framework described in section 2 and the work of Hume discussed in section 3 point to a precise direction: that of starting from the senses and from whatever generalization (inference) can be obtained out of common sense, of history and of the sad predictability of capitalism as we know it. The question remains of how individuals can emancipate themselves from such categories and therefore from capitalism itself. This is both easy and difficult in materialistic political economy.

Relations of ideas and matters of fact in capitalism as we know it are perfectly compenetrated, for the matters of fact of capitalism are relationships of ideas due to the pervasive metaphysical functioning that also unifies concrete objects and the disciplines that study them (the social sciences). Thus, attention must be focused upon the liberation of material objects and of abstract thinking from the dialectical character that makes them perfectly capitalistic. It is necessary to concentrate on distinguishing those features that are superimposed on them because they come from 'capitalism as we know it'. These are recognizable by their dialectical character and by the fact that they bind the objects to certain (predictable) behaviours and functions, and respond to a common logic and language (that often, like in Popper 1990, despite the anti-deterministic intentions coincide with 'normal science').

It is not, therefore, a question of modifying the categories but of progressively divesting them, by studying, of their social intellectual meaning and use, relegating them to the realm of past history. It goes without saying that one can never be sure when the bottom of the process has been reached and one finds oneself in the presence of the concrete and/or abstract as such. This point will most likely occur when the need for a materialistic political economy is no longer felt (that being also the moment when capitalism will be dead and gone).

In sum, put in the language of section 2, the point is to re-gain a non-flawed logic by first supplanting capitalist dialectical intellectuality. Whether this is done from a Skeptical, Stoic, Epicurean or anti-Hegelian Marxist point of view, it is fundamental not to confuse this process with normal life under capitalism. Although they can be pursued simultaneously, revolution and reform, like Hume's common and philosophical persons, are perfectly separate. Those Marxists who think to be pursuing revolution when dealing with the practical issues of capitalism as we know it should ponder this aspect and moderate their claims.

## Conclusion

A relevant element in the present discussion [20] might be: do passions count? But if everything we have discussed holds, passions are repressed and distorted by the capitalist metaphysics. That is why both liberalism and Marxism (as said in footnote 5) have been emasculated and reduced to options within capitalism as we know it rather than revolutionary practices outside it: hence the need, once more, to re-define materialism along sceptical lines such as those inspired by Hume.

All categories of economics and of political economy, even when they are originated by a materialistic process, are the verbal results of a cultural set of logically flawed intellectual operations. As a consequence, in terms of human emancipation they conceal rather than reveal. Plus, their practical use in actual economic and political relationships, which is a necessary consequence of the needs of 'capitalism as we know it', is a hindrance to the emancipation process entailed by the proposals put forward in this paper and especially in section 4. But they are inevitable, and the point is to attend to them with as much intellectual and sensual detachment as possible: revolution does not pass through them, but through intellectual liberation.

From the present materialist perspective engaging capitalist time thinkers influenced by Marx, e.g., Marcuse, Lukàks, Gramsci, or Deleuze (Bell 2009, is an erudite example of joining Hume and Deleuze) becomes as well as political economy an exercise in destructive criticism. In fact their arguments concerning capitalist manipulations of ideology, culture, the economic base, the mass media, are political struggles within the capitalist metaphysics. Instead of going beyond the categories of capitalism, they rather, like economics and political economy, reshuffle them to political or justice (in the economic sense) purposes.

A materialistic political economy can only go through an endless process of identification of items and ideas that can only lead the researcher to discard them. Such creative destruction is perhaps the hardest thing to do in 'capitalism as we know it', for in it construction is deemed by the overwhelming majority to be both more difficult and more worthy of our attention than destruction. This is, needless to say, completely wrong from the logical point of view, the very opposite being true if what has been argued here is valid.

Political economy, as a consequence, is only a means to an end: it exists to be destroyed. This is the true task of materialism. A non-capitalist culture, if it is to be free, is the outcome of a process of pure destruction, and presents us with a sort

of intellectual *Tabula Rasa*, for us to creatively contribute without fetters. In fact the materialist task is that of ridding individuals of the capitalist shackles; but that could lead to perceive that there are yet other types of fetters. This last is one more reason to hasten the destruction of capitalist intellectuality, and of course of political economy, from a materialistic point of view for materialistic purposes.

## Endnotes

[1] This is a much revised version of the paper presented at the IIPPE conference 2012 in Paris, July 5 – 7. Parisian thanks are due to Sergio Vellante and Maria Ivanova. I would like to thank Massimiliano Biscuso, Alex Callinicos, Eric Schliesser, Brunella Antomarini, and Nino Pardjanadze and our children for enlightening discussions or comments. Special thanks go to Chuck McCann and Mary Pat Bailey. The referees helped clarify the argument. None of the above are responsible for anything here written.

[2] With this expression (Micocci, 2009/2010) is meant capitalism as it is now, i.e., something inevitably different from what Adam Smith and Karl Marx and the other early political economists envisaged.

[3] For a summary of the debate in the literature and new interpretations see della Volpe (1980), Colletti (1973, 1974, 1975), Rosenthal (1998), Micocci (2002).

[4] This is not dissimilar from the methodological approach of J.S.Mill (1848/1998) who, however, does not reach as far as Marx into the intellect and conscience of historical men and women. Mill rests contented with pointing out the historical changeability of economic and political customs, and, by undeveloped implication, of human intellectuality.

[5] It has been pointed out that the dialectics of nature is thus denied. It is, indeed, in the form in which it is presented in most of the literature. Nature does have occasional complete ruptures, unlike dialectics especially of the Hegelian types (Rosenthal, 1998, della Volpe, 1980, Micocci, 2002). Further on the importance of Hume's liberty as chance, that leaves reality free to follow no a priori, predictable patterns will be shown.

[6] Some common categories of capitalist life, such as the atheism-belief or fascism-liberalism alternatives, are as a consequence thought about, and acted upon, as if instead of representing incompatible 'otherness' they were amenable to dialectical

contradiction and solution (mediation). This is obviously a manifestation of intolerance for the other (see Micocci, 2012). We unfortunately witness this all the time and everywhere. As a consequence, revolutionary ideas that need the presence of ruptures with disappearances, such as liberalism and communism, are emasculated by emptying them of their revolutionary (Kantian real opposition) character (Micocci, 2012). This explains why mainstream economics or Marxism of the dialectical sorts thrive.

[7] The intellectual – real life dichotomy has been proposed. But the generalized dialectics (the metaphysics) of capitalism erases precisely this difference, as explained so far. The Cambridge controversy (the chosen example for this type of issue of many economists) therefore is, and remains, an issue internal to the mainstream used by some heterodox critics.

[8] For the metaphysics of money and finance see Micocci (2011a, 2011b). For a different interpretation that goes some (timid) way towards identifying the metaphysics see Mann (2009, 2011).

[9] As said, this argument enlarges upon Marx's critique of the Classical political economists: see Colletti, 1973, 1974, 1975, della Volpe, 1980, Rosenthal, 1998, Micocci, 2002, 2009/2010, 2012.

[10] The same could be said for non-economic forms of expression, especially literature. But this is well beyond the scope and aim of the present paper. For an introductory discussion, see Pardjanadze/Micocci (2000).

[11] It also squares with Marx, to the chagrin of orthodox dialectical Marxists. But this cannot be faced here: see Micocci (in preparation).

[12] It has been objected that 'dialectical systems' are no 'causal systems', dialectical causation being an oxymoron. The issue cannot be faced in depth here. Suffice it to say here that capitalist (dialectical) mediation, being all-pervasive, affects all fields of human understanding with its flawed logic (Rosenthal 1998) about causation. For a mathematical instance, neoclassical economics naively applied calculus to its theory and went on doing it to our mainstream days. This absurdity (the literature is extensive) could only take place in the capitalist metaphysics (Micocci 2009/2010).

[13] These can be both positive (e.g., solving a problem) and negative (e.g., creating a problem). Both occurrences demonstrate that an interaction has taken place, i.e., results are meaningful.

[14] Innovation in fact is not Schumpeterian creative destruction like in Schumpeter (1934) but Schumpeterian sad routine as described in Schumpeter (1987).

[15] For the purposes of the present paper, term and concept are put together.

[16] This of course does not mean that capitalism can exclude itself in practice from nature and its ruptures with disappearance, as explained in section 2.

[17] To put it another way, a revolutionary way out of capitalism can only be non-dialectical, or it would fall prey to the dialectical relationships of capitalism. Class struggle for instance (Micocci 2002, Colletti 1973, 1974, 1975), is a dialectical endeavour in capitalism in that it is the very historical routine that keeps capitalism alive, as correctly Marx saw, borrowing from Smith (1776), e.g., Vol.1, pp.169-170. To be revolutionary, it must be non-dialectical, a real opposition. For a discussion of this topic see Micocci (2012) and above all Micocci (in preparation). Emancipation is liberation from the dialectics of capitalism, i.e., from capitalism itself.

[18] Again, it could be argued that this is straightforwardly in Marx. A work on this is on its way (Micocci, in preparation).

[19] Some have found a connection with Popper's work, who claimed indebtedness to Hume as well. But no analogy or similarity is possible if we take Popper's late work to be coherent with the rest (which he himself claims to be the case). Thus, Popper's 'propensities' are 'inherent propensity to produce, upon repetition, a certain statistical average' (1990, p.11, emphasis in the original). In fact 'The tendency of statistical averages to remain stable if the conditions remain stable [precisely what is held by the metaphysics of capitalism, AM] is one of the most remarkable characteristics of our universe. It can be explained [...] only by the propensity theory' (ibid., p.12). 'To sum up: propensities in physics are properties of the whole physical situation and sometimes even of the particular ways a situation changes [...] the same holds [...] in chemistry, biochemistry, and in biology' (p.17, emphasis in the original). 'The present can be described as the continuous process of the actualization of propensities [...] [which are] continuous processes' (p.18). 'Causation is just a special case of propensity' (p.20). For a position similar to Popper's see Traversa (2004).

[20] Guyer (2011) proposes that there might be something in common between Hume (and Hutchison) and Kant, despite Hume (1739) (also in his *Metaphysics of Morals*) deriving reason from passions, which at first sight clashes with Kant's search for pure reason. In fact Kant, Guyer argues, has a passion for liberty.



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