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ADORNO’S MARXISM

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If [Walter] Benjamin said [in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940)] that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things that were not embraced by this dynamic. . . . It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. . . . Benjamin’s writings are an attempt in ever new ways to make philosophically fruitful what has not yet been foreclosed by great intentions. The task he bequeathed was not to abandon such an attempt to the estranging enigmas of thought alone, but to bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts: the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically.

— Adorno, “Bequest” (1945), *Minima Moralia*

The objection has been raised that, because of its immanently critical and theoretical character, the turn to [the] nonidentity [of social being and consciousness] is an insignificant nuance of Neo-Hegelianism or of the historically obsolete Hegelian Left — as if Marxian criticism of philosophy were a dispensation from it. . . . Yet whereas theory succumbed . . . practice became nonconceptual, a piece of the politics it was supposed to lead out of; it became the prey of power. . . . The liquidation of theory by dogmatization and thought taboos contributed to the bad practice. . . . The interrelation of both moments [of theory and practice] is not settled once and for all but fluctuates historically. . . . Those who chide theory [for being] anachronistic obey the *topos* of dismissing, as obsolete, what remains painful [because it was] thwarted. They thus endorse the course of the world — defying which is the idea of theory alone. . . . If [one] resists oblivion — if he resists the universally demanded sacrifice of a once-gained freedom of consciousness — he will not preach a Restoration in the field of intellectual history. The fact that history has rolled over certain positions will be respected as a verdict on their truth content only by those who agree with Schiller that “world history is the world tribunal.” What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations.

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ABSTRACT

Theodor W. Adorno’s writings comprise an attempted recovery of Marx for a dialectic of 20th century social and cultural forms. Through immanent critique of modern aesthetic, philosophical, political and psychological forms of social subjectivity and its antinomies, contradictions and discontents, including those of ostensible Marxism, the thought figures of Adorno’s essays are modeled after and attempt to elaborate Marx’s self-reflexive critique of the subjectivity of the commodity form. Adorno’s critical theory considers modern aesthetic form as social form. Following Marx, Adorno’s critique of modern social forms is concerned with their potential for emancipation as well as domination: the term “culture industry,” for instance, is meant to grasp comprehensively the context for the critical social object and form of aesthetic subjectivity in common for practices of both “hermetic” art and “popular” culture, and is meant to characterize the condition and possibility for critical subjectivity itself, including Adorno’s own. In Adorno’s essays, objects of cultural criticism become “prismatic,” illuminating the formation of subjectivity and providing moments for critical reflection and recognition. However, Adorno’s works faced and sought to provoke recognition of the possibility and reality of social regression as well as regression in thinking. Coming after the collapse of 2nd International Social Democracy in 1914 and the failure of world revolution 1917–19, and inspired by Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch’s thought from this period, Adorno developed a critique of 20th century society that sustained awareness of the problematic of Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky’s Marxism. The coincidence of the later reception of Adorno’s
works with the emergence of social discontents, oppositions and transformations of the
1960s New Left and its aftermath, however, obscured Adorno’s thought during two
decades of “postmodernism,” whose exhaustion opens possibilities for reconstruction of
and development upon the coherence of Adorno’s dialectic, as expression of the extended
tasks and project of Marxism bequeathed by history to the present.
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INTRODUCTION

Why Adorno, why now — why Adorno’s Marxism?

The critical theory of Theodor W. Adorno occupies a special position in 20th century thought. As one of the theorists associated with the Marxist Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, or, more simply, the Frankfurt School, Adorno is known as one of the preeminent Marxist thinkers of the 20th century. However, the character of Adorno’s Marxism has been in some contention, and this has presented considerable difficulties for understanding his work. These difficulties, already evident during Adorno’s lifetime, became compounded after the renaissance in interest in Marxist thought in the 1960s–70s. Questions and problems of 20th century Marxism have determined the reception of Adorno’s critical theory, and the vicissitudes of Adorno’s work, throughout the different historical periods his life spanned, provide an index of the vagaries of Marxist critical theory across the central decades of the 20th century. In recent decades, since the final years of Adorno’s life that coincided with the high period of radicalism in the 1960s, and since his passing in 1969, the changing fortunes of the reception of Adorno’s work has continued to index shifting perspectives on critical theory as expression of the legacy and unfulfilled tasks of past emancipatory possibilities.

Adorno’s own writings and the other documents and records available do not provide for immediately clear judgment on the character of Marxism in Adorno’s thought, especially in his mature works Negative Dialectic and Aesthetic Theory. At the outset, there appear to be two diametrically opposed pieces of evidence from 1968–69,
the very last year of Adorno’s life that can be enlisted in opposing interpretations of his work. On the one hand, there is Adorno’s talk on “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?” given at the German Sociological Association conference in 1968 (and the English-language translation of this talk published in 1968 in *Diogenes* under the more straightforward title “Is Marx Obsolete?”) On the other hand, there is Martin Jay’s 1973 history of the Frankfurt School, *The Dialectical Imagination*, in which Jay reports a statement Adorno made to Jay in a March 1969 conversation expressing Adorno’s opinion that “Marx wanted to turn the whole world into a giant workhouse” (57). However much has been made of this statement, such an utterance by Adorno seems to be, at best, apocryphal, and, at worst, fundamentally misleading as a clue for insight into the nature and character of Adorno’s critical theory, as it obscures if not completely occludes Adorno’s Marxism.

This statement by Adorno that Jay reported, along with the basic argument of Jay’s *Dialectical Imagination* that the Frankfurt School thinkers, especially Horkheimer and Adorno, had broken definitively with Marxism by the 1940s, has influenced much of the reception of Adorno’s work, at least in the Anglophone world, after Adorno’s death in 1969, and has contributed to regarding Adorno primarily as an aesthetic theorist or philosopher rather than as a Marxist critical theorist. However, subsequently revealed documentary evidence casts doubt on the quality and productiveness of Jay’s 1969 interviews with Adorno.¹ This is especially regarding Jay’s basic thesis in *The Dialectical Imagination*, which Jay himself reports earned him Gerhsom Scholem’s

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censure that “Critical Theory was . . . a code word and esoteric synonym for Marxism, nothing more. Everything else is a swindle” (26). Importantly, Jay’s history of the Frankfurt School ends in the 1940s with Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944-47), which contains some self-censored or otherwise suppressed or deliberately obscured Marxist thought figures. Jay does not address the post-WWII works, for instance Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution* (on Hegel and Marx) and *Eros and Civilization* (on Freud and Marx), Adorno’s post-war publication of his pre-war writings from the 1930s, and Adorno’s final monograph *Negative Dialectics*, written in the 1960s, which is Adorno’s most extensive and sustained work in direct engagement with Marxist thought as such. The apparent anti-Marxism of Adorno’s alleged statement to Jay in 1969 is so at odds with everything Adorno wrote and published that it is hard to accept the veracity Jay’s 1969 account. Did Jay hear what he wanted to hear, or did he simply make it up? Further suspicion about this is fueled by Jay’s more recent account (1999), in which he deliberately conflates Marxism and Stalinism, holding that to critique conditions in the Soviet Union in the 1930s was to dispute Marxism itself. At the very least, speculation can be ventured that Adorno’s utterance, if indeed Adorno did make it, might have been a ploy, a test of Jay’s attitudes and intentions; and, hence, Jay’s reporting of Adorno’s statement, *prima facie*, may be potentially self-impeaching, and confirm Adorno’s suspicion that Jay sought to collect evidence with which to indict Adorno and his Institute associates. Perhaps this is why Adorno refused to allow Jay to audio-tape their discussions, to prevent leaving “verbal fingerprints.” Was this merely
Adorno’s “paranoia,” as Jay asserts, or was there a reason for Adorno’s suspicion? If Adorno had such a fear, was this related to his critical theory, or only to his personality?

In a letter Adorno wrote to Marcuse, on March 25, 1969, he stated about Martin Jay that, “This Mr. Jay is a horrible guy. Beyond that he has an unerring instinct to direct himself to the dirt (Unheil). I’ve given him as little time as possible.”² As Jay himself averred, “Perhaps the only productive thing that emerged from our two talks was his assertion, often cited in the years since I first quoted it, that ‘Marx had wanted to turn the world into a giant workhouse.’”³ But Jay, and those who have followed him (any who have cited Jay’s quotation of Adorno, such as Marshall Berman, in All that is Solid Melts into Air), neglected to recognize the bait and trap Adorno had laid for him. For, if Adorno indeed said what Jay reported (which is, however, at least questionable), then Adorno was likely testing Jay’s knowledge of the history of Marxism, specifically the Marxist critique of anarchism. As is common knowledge in the history of Marxism, the characterization of Marx, attributed by Jay to Adorno, is in fact verbatim that of Marx’s great rival in the First International, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin.⁴ Adorno’s writings from the time of his interview with Jay in 1969, the essays “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” and “Resignation,” invoke favorably the Marxist critique of anarchism to orient and support his own critique of the New Left. Adorno wrote in “Resignation,” wryly,
that the New Left activists would not have considered Marx a very “good comrade,” especially since Marx had a “falling out” with the (First) International — that is, with Bakunin and the anarchists. Jay, missing the reference, and reporting Adorno’s words credulously, as if he had caught out Adorno in “confession” of breaking from Marxism, didn’t know what Adorno was talking about. But Adorno knew very well what he was facing in Jay: ignorance of Marxism and its history. The Anglophone reception of Adorno’s work thus virtually began with, not merely the lack of recognition of, but indeed a slander against his Marxism. That this went so long unremarked is itself remarkable. If Adorno wrote “messages in a bottle,” this was the reason: there seemed to be no one capable of understanding properly the Marxism of his work. This problem only grew worse in certain respects after Adorno’s death, not least due to changing historical circumstances.

The dispute over Adorno’s Marxism has provided for a continued, though muted and hence obscure tension in the reception of Adorno’s critical theory. In what ways was Adorno’s critical theory Marxist, or influenced by Marxism? Approached another way, however, the understanding and interpretation of Adorno’s Marxism, of his critical theory’s self-conscious relation to Marx’s own and other Marxists’ writings and their characteristic thought-figures, as well as to the history of Marxist theory and practice, might not only provide for a clearer grasp of Adorno’s critical theory, but might also provide for, in a manner that continues Adorno’s own work, the recovery of important

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5 Jay wrote, in “The Ungrateful Dead,” that Adorno “mistook his confessor for an assassin” (29).
dimensions of Marxism from the fate of Marxism during Adorno’s lifetime, that is, in the 20th century.

There are three historical frames for approaching the question of the Marxism of Adorno’s critical theory. As background, there is, firstly, the formative moment of Adorno’s thought, the period of the collapse of 2nd International Social Democracy at the outset of WWI in 1914, through the October 1917 Revolution in Russia and emergence of international Communism in its wake, and the counterrevolution, civil war, and reaction after 1917 and the German revolution and civil war of 1918–19 and their reverberations through the 1920s–30s leading to the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 and WWII itself. Then, secondly, there is the period of Adorno’s intellectual maturation and literary productivity in the post-WWII era of the 1940s–60s, beginning with Minima Moralia and the book publications of his pre-war writings on Wagner, Husserl and The Philosophy of Modern Music, up through Negative Dialectics (1966) and the posthumously published Aesthetic Theory (1970). Thirdly, and finally, there is the period after Adorno’s passing in 1969, the two-decades’ period of “postmodernism,” what might be considered the “long ’60s,” that finally issued in the events and global transformations surrounding the destruction of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the “global economy” of neo-liberal capitalism by the 1990s that was taken to be a definitive end for Marxism.

Conversely, there are two periods of reception for Adorno’s work that are salient for discussing the continued power and influence of Adorno’s critical theory. First, the
immediate aftermath of the 1960s and the turn to reconsiderations of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, to address the “cultural” dimension of social politics, in the 1970s–80s. And, second, the more recent, renewed interest in Adorno’s work starting in the 1990s.

This discussion of Adorno’s Marxism has been facilitated by the publication, starting in 1998, of several key works by Adorno that cast new light on the subject. These include English translations of several essays in the volume *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” “Those Twenties,” “Critique,” and Adorno’s own introductions to the two German volumes of essays collected in this book. The English translation and publication of Adorno’s correspondence with Marcuse from the last months of his life, in 1969, was published thirty years later, in 1999. The collection edited by Rolf Tiedemann to mark the centenary of Adorno’s birth in 2003, *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, contained the English translation of the 1942 essay, “Reflections on Class Theory,” a fascinating interpretation of Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* in light of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Several volumes of Adorno’s lectures have been published for the first time, in German and English, such as *History and Freedom*, dilating more expansively on Adorno’s thinking than the somewhat cryptic remarks by Adorno on the history of Marxism in the previously published texts. Detlev Claussen’s biography of Adorno, *One Last Genius*, originally published in German in 2003, reported the conversation Adorno had with Horkheimer on the possibility of writing a new version of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1956, in which Adorno expressed at length his intentions.
to follow Lenin. Selections of this conversation, transcribed by Adorno’s wife Gretel, and previously published in Horkheimer’s collected writings, were translated and published in New Left Review in the autumn of 2010, under the title “Towards a New Manifesto?” The complete translation came out as a small book from Verso in 2011. This was very timely, as the writing of this discussion of Adorno’s Marxism was being concluded then.

But this discussion would have been possible, if more difficult, without these recent publications from Adorno’s oeuvre. It would have required perhaps some more inference and greater speculative reconstruction from the previously available evidence, but it was still possible, and, ultimately, just as plausible. What was required was the ability and willingness to make certain connections. Unfortunately, the desire or motivation to do so had been long lacking.

This discussion of Adorno’s Marxism is meant to redress this glaring if largely unknown omission in the extant interpretation of Adorno: the consideration of the fundamental basis in Marxism for Adorno’s thought. To understand Adorno’s Marxism means grasping properly what Marxism meant to Adorno, that is, Adorno’s own perspective on the history of Marxism. What would it mean to see Marxism and its history through Adorno’s eyes? The hypothesis here is that regarding the history of Marxism from Adorno’s perspective is a way for reconstructing the inner coherence of Marxism, as a way of thinking and as a perspective on its own history. It would be part
of an attempt at a Marxist history of Marxism. Adorno, among others, was engaged in a struggle over the historical direction of Marxism itself, the development and transformation of Marxism from within, not supplementation from without. For example, Adorno, in his inaugural lecture of 1932 on “The Idea of Natural History,” stated that, “[I]t is not a question of completing one theory by another, but of the immanent interpretation of a theory. I submit myself, so to speak, to the authority of the materialist dialectic.” Justifying such an effort on Adorno’s part is the substance of this discussion of Adorno’s Marxism. Some motivation in such a direction was already expressed by Fredric Jameson’s 1990 book on Adorno, *Late Marxism*, which argued for Adorno’s Marxism’s relevance precisely as a function of its apparent obsolescence, at the moment of Marxism’s supposedly definitive historical failure. There are two statements that can stand as epigraphs for this project in this respect. One, from Adorno’s last completed monograph, *Negative Dialectics* (1966), argues that, “What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations” (144). The other,

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6 This is the importance for Adorno’s work of Karl Korsch’s 1923 essay “Marxism and Philosophy,” discussed at length in Chapter IV.
8 The alternative would be to adopt an eclectic view of the historical significance of Adorno’s work, as Jay does, for instance, when he states that, “precisely what makes the history of the Frankfurt School still interesting [is] its members’ self-lacerating struggle to salvage only certain aspects of a Marxist tradition that was heading for shipwreck, while honoring its critical impulse through an openness to ideas from elsewhere” (“The Ungrateful Dead,” 27). Another example is Peter Uwe Hohendahl’s 1995 book on Adorno, *Prismatic Thought*, which argued that, “there is no obvious Archimedean point from which all parts [of Adorno’s oeuvre] can be read and understood” (viii). Perhaps it is not obvious, but it is still there.
from Karl Korsch’s “Marxism and Philosophy” (1923), argues that, “a problem which supersedes present relations may have been formulated in an anterior epoch” (58).

History since the 1990s has unfolded in ways that have tended to confirm Jameson’s estimation and prognosis of Adorno’s Marxism’s continued purchase. After the 1970s and ’80s heyday of postmodernism, an exhaustion has set in that provides opportunity for a reconsideration of Adorno. What could have been only dimly perceived in 1990 has since become clearer, if also naturalized and hence inconspicuous: the continued relevance of the problem of capitalism. The continued purchase of Adorno with respect to the accumulated history of capitalism raises the question of continuity and change in capital. This involves addressing the problem of the philosophy of history and its relation to the critical theory of capital in Adorno’s work: Adorno’s work is itself as

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10 In 1995, Hohendahl, for instance, surveying the postmodernist reception of Adorno, treated Jameson’s interpretation in *Late Marxism*, that, “the connection between Adorno’s Marxism and postmodernism is no longer seen diachronically as different phases in history but rather synchronically as intertwined moments of a larger historical dialectic that must be unfolded in terms of an overarching Marxist theory,” and that, “Adorno is first and foremost a theorist of late capitalism,” as “highly controversial” (*Prismatic Thought*, 13). But few, if any, would dispute this today. What has changed is the meaning of this. Certain differences have collapsed or appeared to become moot. (To cite an extreme example, the difference between Heidegger and Adorno collapses when Heidegger is embraced as a fellow critic of capitalist modernity. This is perhaps the reason why the controversy over Heidegger exploded when it did, in the 1990s.) Hohendahl identified a certain critical distance from Adorno that had been maintained by the editors and writers for the journal *Telos* that seemed to close by the end of the 1980s. This signaled changing vicissitudes in Adorno’s reception with respect to the New Left and Marxism:

From the point of view of the New Left, the evaluation of Adorno could either stress and condemn the distance between the political vanguard and the philosopher, or underscore those elements in Adorno’s writing that might, when used in a different context, be revitalized. . . . [I]t would underscore the orthodox moments in Adorno’s writing as the real reason for his shortcomings in the political arena . . . [that Adorno was] impeded by the orthodox Marxist baggage [he] carried along. (5–6)

However, this had changed by the 1990s:

Insistence on the absolute truth value of [Adorno’s] theory is particularly strong in some of the essays on Adorno published in *Telos*. In the 1970s the journal was sympathetic to the work of the Frankfurt School, though it kept a critical distance; in the more recent essays . . . this distance has disappeared. (15)
example of the problem it can help to address. Asking the question of Adorno’s relevance today is the same as asking what the purchase of Adorno’s thought ever was. It could be that there is simply lacking an adequate succession and surpassing of Adorno’s work since his time. The return of the question of Marxism may be merely a phenomenon of the absence of an alternative, still.

**Note on approach, strategy and structure of the dissertation**

This dissertation is structured by the approach and strategy adopted for its investigation into Adorno’s Marxism. The seven chapters are organized into three distinct parts: an introduction outlining the approach to and general situation of Adorno’s work; a central part on Adorno’s Marxism in terms of the theory-practice relation; and a concluding part taking up central themes in Adorno’s work. The chapters of the central Part 2, “Theory-practice,” in particular require some explanation regarding the strategy adopted there.

Each chapter adopts a different approach: Chapter III regards issues of Adorno’s reception through two figures, Jürgen Habermas and Gillian Rose; Chapter IV regards Adorno’s work in the history of Marxism, through Adorno’s thought’s relation to the figures Lenin, Luxemburg, Lukács and Korsch. In Part 1, Chapters I and II lay out central issues in approaching Adorno’s Marxism: the question of address and rhetoric via Gillian Rose and Robert Pippin; and Adorno’s situation of Marxism in the modern philosophy of freedom, from Rousseau and Kant, through Hegel, to Marx. The history of Marxism itself is addressed as a politics of freedom, particularly Lenin’s politics in Adorno’s view.
Part 1. Prolegomena to any future for Adorno

Chapter I. Approaching Adorno

Introduction

This chapter addresses issues and problems of reading Adorno and entering into the Weltanschauung (world-view) of Marxism. Through writings by Adorno scholar Gillian Rose and Hegel scholar Robert Pippin, questions concerning how to approach Marxism in both dimensions of the rhetorical register and the potential address of philosophy and critical social theory are raised. Gillian Rose addresses how the “morality” of “style” and “method” are inherited by Adorno’s work from the preceding history of both Hegel and Nietzsche’s philosophy. Robert Pippin addresses how the concerns of philosophy are not properly located on either side of the antinomy of alternative “perennialist” and “historicist” approaches, and how the truth-content of philosophy is not observable from a third-person perspective and so is not properly judged according to the criteria of the physical sciences that have provided the model for knowledge production in academia. On the other hand, Pippin addresses how the study of philosophy has degenerated into the study of the history of philosophy rather than concerning itself with properly philosophical questions. The question is whether philosophy is practiced any longer. This was certainly a concern of Adorno’s own work, and fundamentally informed what might be called Adorno’s philosophy of the history of philosophy (which Adorno took from Korsch’s 1923 essay “Marxism and philosophy,” addressed in detail in Chapter IV). Later, in Chapter III, this question will be addressed again, by the return of both Rose and
Pippin, where the question of regression connects history with issues of method and style. Both Rose and Pippin raise the issue of plausibility with respect to Adorno’s Marxism, which will be drawn out further with respect to the question of the philosophy of freedom, in Chapter II.

The question of a Weltanschauung is raised briefly, regarding Marxism as an ideology, and the impossibility of extricating either Marxism itself or Adorno’s work (as Marxist) from the problem of ideology. What Karl Popper called the “unfalsifiability” of Marxism that supposedly invalidated it as a form of knowledge is defended in terms of the very different criterion of plausibility. But plausibility itself is an insuperable problem within what Juliet Mitchell called, in a formulation eminently agreeable to Adorno, the “normative delusions of an acceptable psychotic status-quo.” This raises the question of freedom and how to conceive it in the specifically modern sense, which is where Marxism is situated in the subsequent Chapter II.

1. Reading Adorno (Gillian Rose and Robert Pippin)

Gillian Rose, in her monograph on Adorno, The Melancholy Science, addresses Adorno’s writings in terms of “morality and style.” Rose first laid out in her Adorno monograph an interpretive strategy with respect to mode of address and rhetoric that she would later bring to her reading of Hegel. Rose distinguished four styles for her consideration of philosophical address: pleasing, severe, ideal, and ironical. (Rose went on, later, in The Broken Middle, to define her own, different style as “facetious,” which was concerned
with expressing and developing further the relation of severity and irony.) Rose’s
conception of irony owes a great deal to Hegel, as she had found to be the case for
Adorno as well, despite the strong influence of Nietzsche. Central to Rose’s approach to
Adorno’s style is the question of Marxism. Did Marxism have a style? The second
chapter of her second monograph, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981), following her
introductory first chapter, in which she raised the problem of “morality and method” in
the sociological works of Weber and Durkheim and critiqued Lukács and Adorno as
attempting a “sociological Marxism,” is titled “Politics in the Severe Style,” and begins
Rose’s exposition of Hegel’s work. Rose’s later work included close readings of Rosa
Luxemburg’s writings, at the same level of “style.” At issue for Rose was not only the
possibility of philosophy but of politics in the modern era. Who was the addressee of
Marxism?

The question of style is thus central to Adorno’s work, which has been dogged by
the problem of “pessimism,” attributed to Adorno’s supposed status as a “Mandarin”
intellectual. Adorno’s *bona fides* as a Marxist have stood in severe doubt. Martin Jay, for
instance, in his history of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, *The Dialectical
Imagination*, presupposed that Marxist critical theory divorced from political practice
ceases to be Marxism in any meaningful sense; Jay’s narrative of the Frankfurt School is
focused on the supposed path away from Marxism charted by Horkheimer and Adorno’s
“Critical Theory,” from Horkheimer’s inaugural address as Director of the Institute to the
writing of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Adorno was accused of the decisive stylistic
influence on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (however more recent scholarship has demonstrated that Horkheimer was at least as responsible for the book’s style as Adorno was). This is the standard historical account of Adorno’s work and its place in the development of Frankfurt School Critical Theory. In many accounts, Adorno’s influence on Horkheimer in this trajectory is regarded as decisive, presupposing Adorno’s lesser commitment to Marxism to begin with.¹ Much is made of Horkheimer’s reservations about Adorno’s work that gradually gave way to a supposed meeting of minds, especially after the 1939 German-Soviet non-aggression pact and the beginning of World War II. Such an understanding of Adorno and of the Frankfurt School more generally is, however, highly tendentious and distorting. It ignores other, perhaps more significant cross-currents of development, and the shared bases for agreements and disagreements among the Critical Theorists, not least with respect to their Marxism. (For instance, Adorno took great issue and exception to Friedrich Pollock’s “State Capitalism” thesis, insisting that a Marxist approach would demand that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union be regarded as still “contradictory,” and thus still capitalist in Marx’s sense, even if not in the vulgar Marxist sense of attributing the social-historical contradiction to the differentiation of socio-economic classes, the distribution of private property, and the operations of the market.) Supposedly, Adorno had abandoned the working class as addressee for Marxist theory, and thus had followed a familiar trajectory of intellectual abdication and apostasy from Marxism, especially for the Marxists of 1939. The 1960s-

¹ For example, see John Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).
era New Left subjected interpretation of Adorno’s work to the preoccupation of finding an anti-Stalinist Left that had not abandoned the politics of social transformation and potential emancipation. Adorno was taken (along with Horkheimer) to be a Cold War social democrat or liberal, and this informed his readers’ apprehension of his style, which was regarded as expressing historical pessimism and thus political conservatism. Contemporary Marxists too dismissed Adorno, with Lukács famously consigning him to the “Grand Hotel Abyss.” History had supposedly left Adorno behind, whereas Adorno demanded that the “progress” of history be questioned, and its potential regression recognized. Adorno famously thought of himself as writing “messages in a bottle” meant to survive and point beyond the given historical moment, preserving something of an earlier moment that did not fit into the “logic of history,” but still persisted. Most readers dismissed this apparently convoluted gesture. But it was central to and indeed definitive of Adorno’s work.

Adorno’s style as well as the substance of his intellectual concerns sought to address the problem of regression, a constitutive element that can be attributed to the influence of Benjamin’s work. Adorno recognized the paradox of his position, what he came later to call (in one of the valences of his 1966 book’s title) “negative dialectics.” Adorno sought a stylistic solution informed by but distinct from Benjamin’s own. Adorno’s many disputes with Benjamin about the latter’s writings are in fact best addressed as matters of style. Adorno challenged Benjamin’s style of smuggling in dialectics, whereas Adorno’s own writings sought to provoke recognition of regression
through seemingly impossible statements, for which there was apparently neither an addressee nor position from which to speak. Horkheimer lamented that this style condemned one to “sound like an oracle.” Leo Lowenthal complained that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* could only be recommended by James Joyce or Aldous Huxley, that it was as baffling as *Finnegan’s Wake* and as pessimistic as *Brave New World*; in either case, there was no sure reader, at least in the present, which was the point of these works of literature, but placed Adorno and Horkheimer’s work in doubt as theory or philosophy.²

The Hegel scholar Robert Pippin, in two recent writings, has concentrated on the question of conducting philosophy in the present in a way that focuses the problem usefully with respect to problems of interpretation of Adorno’s work. Is interpretation of historical works of philosophy (or theory) consigned to mere “intellectual history?” In “‘Philosophy is its own time comprehended in thought’,” Pippin points out that the study of historical philosophy in the discipline of contemporary Philosophy, as presently practiced, has the status of the “antiquarian” interest of a “librarian.” Pippin analogizes such concerns to the physical sciences, in which the status of prior practices of, say, chemistry, is of only “historical” interest, with little if any contemporary value for the practice of chemistry as a science. What historical philosophy retains, according to such a view, is more “literary” than substantial. And such literature is to be approached as a historical artifact, in the sense of contextual accounts of origins and conditions. But Pippin challenges this view, both of philosophy as an “ahistorical” mode of inquiry akin

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to the current practices of the physical sciences, and of relegating historical considerations of philosophy as “literary” expression to questions of context. Instead, Pippin offers an approach to philosophy as historical in a different and specific sense. Pippin uses an anecdote about his daughter being asked about Pippin’s profession as a “philosopher,” to which she responded, “He steals ideas from dead people.” Asked why he doesn’t come up with his own ideas, she replied, “He says all the best ones have already been thought up, but we don’t yet really understand what they mean, and have to think about them some more.” Such an approach, according to Pippin, potentially provides something other than either a “perennialist” or “relativist” approach to historical philosophy, or, to the question of philosophy as a historical phenomenon, as a phenomenon of history.

In a New York Times op-ed essay of October 10, 2010, “In defense of naïve reading,” Pippin attacked the academic standards of research that have been borrowed from the physical sciences that fundamentally distort a “humanistic” enterprise such as philosophy and render its mode of knowledge opaque:

The main aim was research: the creating and accumulation and transmission of knowledge. And the main model was the natural science model of collaborative research: define problems, break them down into manageable parts, create sub-disciplines and sub-sub-disciplines for the study of these, train students for such research specialties and share everything.
According to Pippin,

Literature and the arts have a dimension unique in the academy, not shared by the objects studied, or “researched” by our scientific brethren. They invite or invoke, at a kind of “first level,” an aesthetic experience that is by its nature resistant to restatement in more formalized, theoretical or generalizing language. This response can certainly be enriched by knowledge of context and history, but the objects express a first-person or subjective view of human concerns that is falsified if wholly transposed to a more “sideways on” or third person view.

Furthermore,

[S]uch works also can directly deliver a kind of practical knowledge and self-understanding not available from a third person or more general formulation of such knowledge. There is no reason to think that such knowledge . . . is any less knowledge because it cannot be so formalized or even taught as such. [But this calls for] an appreciation and discussion not mediated by a theoretical research question recognizable as such by the modern academy.

This problem attends especially the interpretation of Adorno’s work. So, the question of the “subjectivity” for Adorno’s work presses for proper consideration. It cannot be a matter of intellectual history in the sense of the history of ideas, but demands an account of the potential addressee and style of rhetoric in Adorno’s writings, and how
this relates to the substance of Adorno’s concerns. Adorno’s writing as a style of politics, then, must be recognized. Adorno’s work follows his self-understanding as a Marxist. Pippin, in “‘Philosophy is its own time comprehended in thought’,” addressed the task of approaching historical philosophy from the standpoint of regression, that is, the demand that the reader and interpreter, the “subject” of the philosophical work, re-attain the problem as first formulated in the philosophy in question. In other words, the task and difficulty of aspiring to Kant and Hegel — or, Marx and Adorno — as inextricable from understanding their works, specifically as philosophy. This is also true of Adorno’s work as theory. It is not to be understood in either “perennial” or historically “relative” terms, but rather as part of the history informing the present. Adorno’s work is undigested history. And history is itself, in this sense, a social relation. The thrust of Pippin’s argument is that philosophy is in danger of being lost as a mode of inquiry, a concern familiar from Adorno’s own work.3

So, what resources does Adorno’s work itself contain for recognizing and interpreting its own self-understanding, so that a reader may aspire to attain to the problems formulated in it, as part of the historical relation of our time to Adorno’s own?

3 For instance, in “Procrustes,” orphaned from Minima Moralia (1944–47), Adorno states that, The endless collegial hunt, careering between the ‘hypotheses’ and ‘proofs’ of social science, is a wild-goose chase since each of the supposed hypotheses, if inhabited by theoretical meaning at all, breaks through precisely the shaky facade of mere facticity, which in the demand for proofs prolongs itself as research. . . . As gauche miming of the exact sciences, beside whose results the social sciences seem paltry, research clings fearfully to the reified plaster cast of vital processes as a guarantee of correctness, whereas its only proper task — one thereby improper to the methods of research — would be to demonstrate the reification of the living through those methods’ immanent contradiction. (Adorno, “Messages in a Bottle,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, New Left Review I/200 [July–August 1993], 12.)
There is already a model for this in Adorno’s own approach to historical thinkers such as Kant, Hegel and Marx. One might, for example, approach Adorno similarly to the way Adorno approached Marx. In this sense, Gillian Rose’s critique of Marx’s approach to Hegel, about the problems of which Rose found evidence in judging Hegel’s style, can prove salutary. Adorno’s scattered commentary on the formulations in Marx’s writings, in which Adorno appears to “psychologize” Marx, also provide evidence in this respect.4

What problems of style did Rose find in Hegel that can help interpretation of Adorno? Rose found that Marx was best — most “Hegelian” — when he was not “self-conscious” about his relation to Hegel, but spontaneously allowed Hegel to inform his own style and thus reproduce the Hegelian problematic — the “dialectic.” This was not a matter of accepting Hegel’s philosophical conclusions (for instance, as “theory”) so much as proceeding according to what Rose called Hegel’s “speculative proposition.” Rose found Marx (and Lukács and Adorno after him) most compelling when the critique of capital was thus “speculative” rather than “positive,” as in an “ordinary proposition,” and “analytical” in the “sociological” sense. This is because what is aspired to be accomplished is not “objective” knowledge about society, but rather the critical self-recognition of the subject. As Marx famously put it, in the 1845 “Theses on Feuerbach,” the “educator must himself be educated,” first and foremost about oneself:

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4 For instance, see “Resignation” (1969), where Adorno states that “In Marx there lies concealed a wound. He may have presented the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach so authoritatively because he knew he wasn’t entirely sure about it” (Critical Models, 290).
The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change \[Selbstveränderung\] can be conceived and rationally understood only as \textit{revolutionary practice}.

This means, with respect to theory as a phenomenon of history, or, history as a social relation, expressed through the problem of historical interpretation, that there is an inevitable problem of reconstructing the self-understanding of the theorist — Adorno. Only by, as Pippin put it, aspiring to the re-attaining the self-understanding of Adorno with respect to his own work can we begin to understand what it may mean for us, today. Such an approach admits no “third person” perspective, or does so only “ironically” and not “theoretically,” and so is ineluctably “literary” in nature and character. We cannot “account for” Adorno — Adorno cannot “account for” himself, in the sense of his work rebutting charges and “justifying” itself. Especially today, when there is no justifying (Adorno’s) Marxism, at least not without banalizing it as (however misguided) humanitarianism, limited to (the ignorance of) its own time. Adorno’s work defies attempts to “get past” it, and so demands the kind of approach Pippin outlines for (historical) philosophy.

Rose described Adorno’s work as “ironical” in what she took to be the Nietzschean (rather than Hegelian) sense of “irony.” Such irony does not express skepticism about its readership (what Hegel called skepticism about the subject or life itself, for which Romantic literature provided abundant examples), but rather poses the necessity of a presently non-existent subject. This is what it means to say that Adorno’s
work aims to “provoke recognition,” or, to constitute its own readership, to help, however provisionally and modestly, to produce the subject it demands, which would thus begin to intimate, potentially, transcending the existing condition of the reader, or the subject as it is, prior to reading Adorno. Adorno’s work speculates on the possibility of its readership, but is in this sense “non-identical” to it. The problem with a historical-contextual interpretation of Adorno, then, would be precisely its proposing an “identity” of Adorno’s work with its own historical moment, however that may be construed, whereas, Adorno’s work was premised, rather, on the “non-identity” of its own historical moment with itself, and the non-identity of any (future) moment of its reading. Can we “understand” Adorno?

It should be clarified, however, that this did not mean for Adorno that his writing was itself a “revolutionary practice” in Marx’s sense adumbrated in the “Theses on Feuerbach.” For what was missing for Adorno (in this way like Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a “book for none and for all” that pointed a reader to “overcoming oneself”) was such revolutionary practice. Rather, Adorno’s work (like Marx’s) *called for* revolutionary practice, in order for his work to both realize itself and render itself (historically) obsolete. Adorno’s “messages in a bottle” aimed at a non-existent addressee precisely in hopes that a similarly stranded subject — an aporia of non-identity and self-contradiction — would no longer exist, and the necessity of reading Adorno’s work would be thus transcended. This has not yet happened.
2. The question of a Weltanschauung

It is necessary to note, perhaps, that one crucially bedeviling aspect of Adorno’s Marxism is something which Adorno himself only disparaged, namely, the question of a Weltanschauung or “worldview,” that is, Marxism as an “ideology.” As Freud put it,

There are assertions in Marx’s theory which have struck me as strange. . . . I am far from sure that I understand these assertions aright, nor do they sound to me “materialistic” but, rather, like a precipitate of the obscure Hegelian philosophy in whose school Marx graduated.5

For Adorno’s opponents, such as Karl Popper, in the famous “positivist dispute,”6 Adorno’s Marxism was simply a confession of faith, as opposed to reason. For Popper, Marxism could not be “science” because it was unfalsifiable. But Adorno’s conception of science, following Marx and Hegel (and Kant and Descartes before them) was rather different. For the problem of the conditions of possibility for knowledge, or for subjectivity itself, is quite another thing from the problem of disposable models of inquiry. Marxism, for Adorno, represented the potential for subjectivity to reflect upon its own (social-historical) conditions of possibility. This was the meaning of the “Hegelian” dimension of Marxism, and the problem of worldview or ideology was inescapable from this perspective.

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Furthermore, as the Marxist-inspired scholar of Freudian psychoanalysis Juliet Mitchell put it (in a 2006 interview), in a way Adorno would have approved, a Left, that is, a politics with an emancipatory social-transformative intent, must confront

the normative delusions of an acceptable psychotic status quo, which is what our political world very often is. . . . The question is . . . the critique of the normative psychosis of the political social world.7

Dick Howard, a scholar of Rosa Luxemburg, wrote of Marxism, in *The Specter of Democracy* (2002), that it remains tempting, despite political failure, as “nonfalsifiable:” The problem with attempts to save Marxism from the demise of “really existing socialism” is that they cannot reply to the objection from Popper: that it is nonfalsifiable. It remains as a horizon, a framework or narrative that can internalize contradictions as simply stages in a presumably necessary historical development. This is the case even of Rosa Luxemburg, the spontaneist, who insisted that “only the working class can make the word flesh.” This most militant of activists was content to have refuted Eduard Bernstein when she showed that his reformist socialism contradicted the text of Marx. Luxemburg, . . . whose final article from the ruins of a failed revolution affirmed that “revolution is the only kind of war in which the final victory can be built only on a series of defeats,” could be perhaps . . . the model of a post-1989 Marxist. Defeat in the class

7 Juliet Mitchell interviewed by E. Efe Çakmak and Bülent Somay, “There is never a psychopathology without the social context,” *Cogito* (Turkey) 44–45 (2006).
struggle was for her only a stage in the learning process that would
necessarily lead to the final goal. How can she be proven wrong? (7)

Adorno inherits this problem from Marxism: Adorno’s Marxism is unfalsifiable. What
status does Adorno’s thought have, specifically as Marxist? To address this properly
requires situating Marxism in the historically modern philosophy of freedom, the peculiar
“science” of which German Idealism represented the philosophical “revolution” of the
18th century, and addressing the fate of freedom as a philosophical concern in the 19th
century, Marx’s time. If Kantian “critique” was concerned with conditions of possibility,
then Marx’s “scientific socialism” was concerned with the critique of socialism as
ideology, or, as part of the necessary form of appearance of social reality. Adorno’s
thinking in the 20th century partakes of this historical peculiarity of Marxism, sharing its
fate: Is the philosophy of freedom “ideological,” or can it be reflexively critical?

First, it is necessary to establish what is meant by the “philosophy of freedom,”
and what it means to say that it is, as such, reflexive and critical. For this, it is necessary
to turn to the “Kantian revolution,” as providing the basis for Marxism.

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8 Robert Pippin, in his short essay “On Critical Inquiry and Critical Theory: A Short History of Non-
Being” (Pippin’s response to the journal Critical Inquiry’s 2004 symposium on the future of critical
theory), wrote of the “Kantian aftermath” that,
the original Kantian idea of critical philosophy, a critique by reason of itself . . . [is] the
hinge on which something quite new in the history of philosophy and social and perhaps
aesthetic theory swings open. . . . The most important result of the all-destroying Kant
was the destruction of metaphysics as traditionally understood (a priori knowledge of
substance). Philosophy[, that is], nonempirical claims to know, could not be understood
as about the world or things in themselves but rather had to be reconceived as concerned
with our mode of knowledge of objects. . . . This all meant that some new way of
conceiving of philosophy adequate to the realization of the radically historical nature of
the human condition was now necessary, especially one that could distinguish in some
way what was central, elemental, essential, in some way, that on which other quite
variable and much more contingent aspects of human historical time depended. The
problem of understanding properly (especially critically) conceptual, artistic, and social change was henceforth at the forefront. . . . [T]he modern form of life coming into view after the middle of the nineteenth century or so was in some basic way unacceptable, unaffirmable, pathological even. . . . [I]t then became obvious how difficult it would be to theorize . . . this gap or absence or lack in this new, comprehensive form of life[,] such that what was missing was what was not yet actual, but being realized. (Critical Inquiry 30 [Winter 2004], 424–426.)
Chapter II. Marxism and freedom

Introduction

In this chapter, Marxism is addressed in terms of the modern philosophy of freedom, originating with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and taken up as the explicit concern of Kant’s critical philosophy and the German Idealism of the “Kantian aftermath.” This usually neglected aspect of Marxism is central for Adorno’s work. In the absence of this concern, Marxism’s characterization of freedom degenerates into one of the question of “freedom for whom, to do what?,” which avoids the question of the transformation of society as a whole: existing social divisions are naturalized and not regarded properly within the social-historical totality, the object of critique that Marxism inherited not only from Hegel but also from Kant. The issue is not the freedom of some as opposed to others, but the transformation of social relations, of society as a whole. Naturalizing the question of freedom, then, in traditional rather than modern terms, loses a range of issues regarding subjectivity and its changes as a function of history.

After establishing this specific concern of Marxism regarding the modern concept of freedom, the question becomes one of the Marxism of Adorno’s own time and Adorno’s work’s relation to it. The most important Marxist historical figure in Adorno’s era was Lenin. To grasp Adorno’s Marxism’s relation to Marxism more generally, therefore, it becomes important to show both what Lenin shared in common with preceding and contemporaneous Marxists, that is, how Lenin was a Marxist, and how Lenin figured in Adorno’s work.
This raises questions of Adorno’s own political orientation, and how Adorno understood his own politics. Adorno explicitly described himself as a “Leninist,” that is, a follower of Lenin in revolutionary politics.¹ The question is, in what ways did Adorno follow Lenin? And, how did Adorno understand his own reasons for doing so? While there is scant textual basis for such an inquiry in Adorno’s writings, there is enough to draw connections to other aspects of Adorno’s work that might otherwise appear to be unrelated or even contradictory to the political orientation of his Marxism. Investigation of Adorno’s Marxism opens on to the further question of the politics of Frankfurt School Critical Theory more generally and how it was meaningfully “Marxist.”

Pursuing further the question of Adorno’s “Leninism” requires examining Lenin’s own politics and its historical roots and self-understanding. Adorno’s resistance to the course of 20th century Marxism means inquiring into how Lenin served Adorno in this respect: how Lenin’s politics was inassimilable to the course of 20th century Marxism, from which Adorno’s work was distinguished theoretically as well as to which Adorno’s work was opposed politically. Specifically, the relation between Adorno’s work and classical liberal political thought (for instance Kant and Hegel as political thinkers) requires investigating the origins of Lenin’s politics in that tradition as well.

For Adorno’s “Leninism” is actually no more surprising than the assumptions of Lenin’s own politics and its own assumptions, inherited from preceding liberalism, which

¹ See, for instance, the satisfaction with which Karl Popper and his colleagues repeatedly ironically invoked Lenin, the quintessential revolutionary politician of the 20th century, against Adorno and Habermas’s perspectives in The Positivist in German Sociology (1976): it was self-evident to Popper’s cohort, as well as simply taken for granted by Adorno and Habermas, that what the latter desired, as the only potential substantial engagement with the possibility of social change, was revolution.
became buried by the subsequent history of 20th century politics generally, and in what became of Marxism specifically, especially after its crisis in World War I and the revolutions that followed. What has been mistaken for Adorno’s and other Frankfurt School Critical Theorists’ supposed “Mandarin intellectualism,” tied to 19th century history, can be found as well in Lenin’s politics. This should not be naturalized to an account of 20th century history but, according to the spirit of Adorno’s work, should rather serve to critique the course of that history, expressing a historical potential that went unfulfilled.

In order to situate such “unfulfilled potential of history” posited by Adorno’s work, return to Marx’s and thus Marxism’s original moment allows for the political dimensions of Adorno’s controversial theory of historical regression to be drawn out and specified.

1. Marxism and the philosophy of freedom

The Kantian revolution

Kant’s Introduction to his Third Critique, *The Critique of Judgment*, established a distinction between two sets of concepts, “concepts of Nature” and “concepts of freedom.”

What was the substance of this distinction? Kant initiated a revolution in modern philosophy that distinguished his “idealism” from all preceding forms (such as Plato’s), giving rise in the history of philosophy to the tendency called German Idealism.

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This idealism was not “German” but rather modern. Kant was deeply influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s concept of “perfectibility,” which recognized the infinite adaptability and transformability of human nature, initiating the new, modern conception of freedom. Rousseau was profoundly influential for many seminal thinkers of modern society, such as Adam Smith, who sought to think through the implications of this radically new conception of human nature as freedom, or, more dialectically, of humanity as the expression of the freedom of Nature, its purposeful transformability.

In this philosophical tendency of the modern concern of freedom, initiated by Kant and followed by Hegel and Marx, “Nature” and “Spirit” are distinguished as concepts of “being” and “becoming:” what “is” and what “ought” to be, what could and should be, but is not yet, and in a process of becoming. In this view, what “is” is conditioned, in its essential “actuality,” by what “ought” to be; and the “given” or “ever same” is distinguished from the “new.” Kant’s dialectical philosophy of Nature and

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3 The only portrait that hung in Kant’s study was that of Rousseau. It was after reading Rousseau that Kant took his 10 year hiatus of publication that divides his work into “pre-critical” and “critical” periods, before issuing his First Critique, *The Critique of Pure Reason*. As James Miller put it in his Introduction to Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), the principle of freedom and its corollary, “perfectibility” . . . suggest that the possibilities for being human are both multiple and, literally, endless. . . . Contemporaries like Kant well understood the novelty and radical implications of Rousseau’s new principle of freedom [and] appreciated his unusual stress on history as the site where the true nature of our species is simultaneously realized and perverted, revealed and distorted. A new way of thinking about the human condition had appeared. . . . As Hegel put it, “The principle of freedom dawned on the world in Rousseau, and gave infinite strength to man, who thus apprehended himself as infinite.”


5 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 41. In Hegel, Kant’s distinction of Nature and Freedom is posed in terms of Nature and Spirit (*Geist*); for Hegel, the activity of Spirit is (the development of) freedom.
Spirit sought to establish the reality of Spirit and Mind (the mindfulness or mindedness of Spirit), or, the reality of the subjectivity of freedom. Accordingly, the term Nature is not limited to the colloquial sense of physical or biological nature but rather encompasses as well culture and history: everything that is “natural” into which one is born. History is “nature,” or, put the other way, nature has a history, that is, an account of the open-ended and still on-going transformation of what exists. Humanity, in this view, is characterized by the self-consciousness, the mindful or spiritual (Geistig) aspect of the transformation of nature. The Geistig activity of humanity is the consciousness of the self-transformation of Nature.

In distinguishing between Nature and freedom, Kant sought to philosophically account for the possibility of change that is not merely what happens (accidentally), but is brought forth by a subject of self-transformation (“consciously”). This is the foundation of otherwise cryptic passages in Kant on “self-legislation,” “autonomy,” and the like. It is also the basis for Kant’s post-Enlightenment rehabilitation and revolutionizing of “metaphysics.” For Kant thought that thinking about transformation, that is, both continuity and change in a conscious process, is not possible without “metaphysical” categories. Kant thought that such metaphysics provided categories not of Nature but rather of freedom and its subjectivity, an” idealist” metaphysics of the subject of freedom, but an idealism of a peculiar kind. This involved a “dialectic,” for such metaphysics could only be what Kant called “speculative” and not “empirical,” that is,

6 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 41n1. Here, Kant distinguishes between the “analytical” and “synthetical” use of concepts, the latter characterized by the “union of the conditioned with its condition” that transforms both.
not based in any given experience, for freedom was not to be found in any particular moment but rather in its potential, and ultimately actual transformation. Kant revolutionized philosophy by fundamentally resituating and overcoming the traditional metaphysical opposition of idealism and materialism. There was no priority of the world or of the subject, for both arose together.

Hegel and Marx sought to build upon and develop further Kant’s revolution in philosophy, which surpassed and transcended the traditional antinomies of idealism and materialism, rationalism and empiricism, etc., replacing these with a “subject-object dialectic,” concerned with the object and subject of “absolute” or irreducible and unbounded freedom.

But Kant’s revolution in philosophy was itself an attempt to digest and bring to greater awareness a preceding and on-going revolution in history, what Kant called “Enlightenment,” or the coincidence, in post-Renaissance history, of profound transformations in science (or practical inquiry), religion (or culture), politics, economics, and philosophy. This was the revolutionary transformation of modern society. What was remarkable to Kant (following Rousseau) about this change was the self-activity of humanity in it, or, how human beings had brought about this apocalyptic transformation themselves, and what potential for humanity this revolution revealed.

Adorno’s work stands in this tradition and indeed presupposes it. In this, Adorno followed Marx, as a follower of Hegel. For Marx approached the problem of “capital” as
a problem of freedom in modern society. Hence, any critiques by Adorno of this philosophical tradition initiated by Rousseau and Kant and followed by Hegel and Marx are “immanent” to it, namely, from within and not without its concepts and categories.

**Being and becoming (Juliet Mitchell)**

Kant distinguished between “natural concepts” and the “concept of freedom.” Kant thus distinguished between concepts of Nature and Freedom, being and becoming, the given and the new. Freedom was understood by Kant, in a revolutionary way, owing to Rousseau, as the transformation of being and the bringing forth of the new, Freedom as the transcendental property of Nature. For instance, Kant’s Third Critique’s exploration of the faculty of judgment, that is, the capacity to grasp something without a concept, the ability to recognize beauty without it being reducible to prior experience, and to recognize genius, that is, originality, the new and different not being nonsensical but revelatory, was concerned primarily with demonstrating the capacity for change in subjectivity, the reality of the subject as an agent of self-transformation. Kant’s “revolution” in philosophy, initiating the “Copernican turn” of German Idealism at the

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7 Marx thus cited favorably Rousseau’s concept of alienation in *On the Social Contract* (1762), which was taken up in Kant’s concept of “unsocial sociability” (“What is Enlightenment?,” 1784) and subsequently by Hegel, for instance in Marx’s critique of Bruno Bauer’s *The Jewish Question* (1844):

> Whoever dares undertake to establish a people’s institutions must feel himself capable of changing, as it were, human nature, of transforming each individual, who by himself is a complete and solitary whole, into a part of a larger whole, from which, in a sense, the individual receives his life and his being, of substituting a limited and mental existence for the physical and independent existence. He has to take from man his own powers, and give him in exchange alien powers which he cannot employ without the help of other men.
climax of Enlightenment, was in this emphasis on freedom as the proper problem and
domain of philosophy.

The modern concept of freedom, freedom in becoming rather than in being, in the
potential and possibility of what could and should or “ought” to be, as opposed to what
merely “is,” found its canonical philosophical formulation with Kant. The aftermath of
this revolution in philosophy has reverberated ever since, but found special resonance in
the work of Hegel and Marx, who thus sought to follow Kant.

Kant had overcome the metaphysics of traditional materialism and idealism,
already challenged by empiricist accounts of reason by Hume, for instance, giving rise to
the specific form of “German” idealism, going beyond not merely Platonic but also
Cartesian idealism, or, what has been termed, with Hegel, “objective” as opposed to
subjective idealism. Kant’s transcendence of the idealist vs. materialist or rationalist vs.
empiricist and realist antinomy in philosophy was followed and elaborated further by
Hegel and Marx. Adorno’s thought takes place in this development.

Such modern philosophy of freedom can be obscured by recourse to more
traditional philosophical questions, such as the necessity or contingency of causality, or
the “problem of free will” and the possibility of choice, let alone those of epistemology,
the very ability to know. These are the traditional questions of philosophy, not the
modern ones. They are not the principal questions concerning the post-Kantian
philosophy of Hegel, Marx or Adorno, and their works suffer from interpretation
restricted to such problems. Philosophy after Kant is not concerned with the problem of
whether humanity is free, but rather the implications and directions — the how — of that freedom. Without establishing the centrality and priority of the modern problem of freedom, that is, the reality of subjectivity in free self-transformation, Adorno’s work after Kant, following Hegel and Marx, remains obscure.

Contestation of the roots for Marxism in German Idealism can be found, for instance, in the contemporary discussion, from the late 1960s, of Juliet Mitchell’s landmark essay “Women: The Longest Revolution” (1966), in which the Gramsci scholar Quintin Hoare took issue with Mitchell’s “idealism,” identifying this with a “reformist” perspective. Mitchell had concluded her essay with the following formulation of emancipation:

Circumstantial accounts of the future are idealist and worse, static.

Socialism will be a process of change, of becoming. A fixed image of the future is in the worst sense ahistorical. . . . As Marx wrote [in “Precapitalist Economic Formations,” in the Grundrisse]: “What (is progress) if not the absolute elaboration of (man’s) creative dispositions, without any preconditions other than antecedent historical evolution which makes the totality of this evolution — i.e., the evolution of all human powers as such, unmeasured by any previously established yardstick — an end in itself? What is this, if not a situation where man does not reproduce himself in any determined form, but produces his totality? Where he does

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not seek to remain something formed by the past, but is the absolute
movement of becoming?9 . . . [L]iberation . . . under socialism will not
be “rational” but a human achievement, in the long passage from Nature to
Culture which is the definition of history and society. (37)

Hoare attacked Mitchell for her argument’s supposedly “ahistorical” and entirely
“bourgeois” character:

Society becomes a “long passage from Nature to Culture,” and socialism
is defined (!) by the unity of equality and freedom. In this view of history
and society, Marx might never have existed. . . . The history which could
provide an analysis of the position of women and a context for their
emancipation ( politicization) is not some Hegelian concept — it is a

9 The fuller quotation from Marx’s Grundrisse is as follows:

[T]he ancient conception, in which man always appears (in however narrowly national,
religious, or political a definition) as the aim of production, seems very much more
exalted than the modern world, in which production is the aim of man and wealth the aim
of production. In fact, however, when the narrow bourgeois form has been peeled away,
what is wealth, if not the universality of needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive powers
etc., of individuals, produced in universal exchange? What, if not the full development of
human control over the forces of nature — those of his own nature as well as those of so-
called “nature”? What, if not the absolute elaboration of his creative dispositions, without
any preconditions other than antecedent historical evolution which make the totality of
this evolution — i.e., the evolution of all human powers as such, unmeasured by any
previously established yardstick — an end in itself? What is this, if not a situation where
man does not reproduce in any determined form, but produces his totality? Where he
does not seek to remain something formed by the past, but is in the absolute movement of
becoming? In bourgeois political economy — and in the epoch of production to which it
corresponds — this complete elaboration of what lies within man, appears as the total
alienation, and the destruction of all fixed, one-sided purposes as the sacrifice of the end
in itself to a wholly external compulsion. Hence in one way the childlike world of the
ancestors appears to be superior; and this is so, insofar as we seek for closed shape, form
and established limitation. The ancients provide a narrow satisfaction, whereas the
modern world leaves us unsatisfied, or, where it appears to be satisfied, with itself, is
vulgar and mean.
concrete history which still largely remains to be written and made. And
this history can only become concrete if its basis is the class struggle,
subsuming feminism and at the same time transcending it. (81)

As Hoare put it, Mitchell had failed to show, concretely, how

The advent of the industrial revolution should have liberated women, but it
didn’t; the relaxation of sex taboos seems the weakest link, but is actually
absorbed into the fun-ethos of the capitalist market. (80)

Thus, according to Hoare, Mitchell’s perspective became the asymptotic utopia of

bourgeois emancipation: Mitchell’s “longest revolution” for women becomes the

bourgeois revolution, with the abstraction of “human emancipation” its inevitable
horizon.10

10 Mitchell herself maintained that Hoare “totally misunderstood” her work. See Mitchell, *New Left Review* I/41 (1967), 81. Moreover, Mitchell stated unequivocally that, “Here I take issue with Quintin Hoare but not with Karl Marx” (82). In her reply to Hoare, Mitchell elaborated her agreement with Marx, focusing on the historical specificity of capital according to a Marxian approach:

So much for this part of [Hoare’s] misunderstanding of my article. There is a further substantial point underlying his disagreement. Quintin Hoare criticises me for “never admitting that the family is a form of private property.” I don’t admit it, because I don’t think it is. It is a means for the retention and attainment of private property and so is the woman within it. But not unless women are literally exchange products can they be identical with objects and property. Industrialism does separate the family from its earlier immediate associations with the economy and this separation prevents in any case the total coincidence of the family and private property. It seems that Quintin Hoare is asking us to analyse the position of women in preindustrial conditions. Elsewhere he confirms this preoccupation: “... the ‘economist’ approach of Marx and Engels is the basis for a discussion of the position of women. What specifies the position of women in history until the industrial revolution [Mitchell’s italics] is that her participation in production is mediated through the family.” To concentrate on this preindustrial area — even assuming the hypothesis is correct — would be to write history with a vengeance. (83)

What this means is that concrete, empirical, or “material” social forms, such as the family — but also, importantly, forms of “production” and the socioeconomic classes derived from them — after the Industrial Revolution, cannot be considered themselves to be manifestations or embodiments of capital, but, rather, must be approached as symptomatic responses to the problem of capital, which is an “alienated” social
The status of this supposed “idealist abstraction” is precisely what is at issue with respect to the philosophy of the bourgeois revolution and Marxism’s place in it. But the Marxist approach to the question of freedom is “dialectical” with respect to the bourgeois revolution: a critical analysis and theory of why the bourgeois revolution went unfulfilled as a function of the development and crisis of capital. From a Marxist perspective, capital is the obstacle that historically emerged in the course of the bourgeois revolution. Capital, according to Marx, renders the bourgeois revolution unfulfilled — in a sense, unfulfillable, and thus inadequate to itself, or self-contradictory and undermining of itself — and, so, overcoming capital would mean both subsuming and transcending the bourgeois revolution, but first by completing it. Marxism was meant to be the Aufhebung of the bourgeois revolution.  

form, informing and conditioning society in a way that is not the result of a conscious social convention. By contrast, the social forms prior to capital, or, in the “preindustrial” epoch, were indeed what they were for people in their conscious practices. In Mitchell’s language, such “preindustrial” social forms were in “immediate association” and “total coincidence,” as opposed to their condition of “separation” under capital. This was Mitchell’s “substantial point” of Marxian disagreement with Hoare.

As Adorno put it, capital, or the “fetish character of the commodity” is “not a fact of consciousness, but is dialectical in the crucial sense that it produces consciousness” (letter to Walter Benjamin, August 2, 1935, in Benjamin, Selected Writings vol. 3 1935–38 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002], 54).

11 Adorno referred to Marxism the “consummation of the commodity character in a Hegelian self-consciousness;” that “to understand the commodity as a dialectical image to means to understand it, too, as a motif of its decline and ‘sublation’ [Aufhebung]” (letter to Benjamin of August 2, 1935, in Benjamin, Selected Writings vol. 3, 56).

As Lee Braver has put it, Hegelian philosophy, of which Marxism may be considered a part, is “one enormous Aufhebung” of Kantian thought (A Thing of this World: A History of Continental Antirealism [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007], 60).

Robert Pippin has addressed this post-Hegelian issue of “self-consciousness” in the world, after the bourgeois revolution, in Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), as follows: [There is a] post-Hegelian insistence on the relevance of human sociality and the historicity of that sociality in accounting for cognitive success or even in understanding properly the nature of the basic mind-world or subject-object relation inevitably presupposed in any account of the very possibility of epistemic or practical success.
In the late 1920s, the director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research Max Horkheimer wrote an aphorism titled “The Little Man and the Philosophy of Freedom” that is an excellent conspectus on the politics of Marxism. The “Marxist clarification of the concept of freedom” that Horkheimer called for in concluding his aphorism is the usually neglected aspect of Marxism. Marxism is usually regarded as an ideology of

There are many forms of such claims of the philosophical relevance of sociohistorical actuality to what had traditionally been considered strictly philosophical issues in epistemology, metaphysics, moral theory, aesthetics and so forth: socioeconomic matters in Marxism, genealogy and psychology in Nietzsche, mood and resoluteness in Heidegger and existentialism, archeology and genealogy in Foucault, the dependence of subject on structure (or the disappearance of the subject into structure) in structuralism, and so forth. . . .

[Hegel’s work was] involved [in] a much broader turning point in the Western philosophical tradition, and so is especially valuable in the way it can highlight the issue: transformation of philosophy, or a farewell to philosophy altogether? . . . Since the topic of . . . self-consciousness, together with another to which it is deeply linked, freedom, are far and away the most important topics in what we call German Idealism, [we must] begin with the introduction of the idea of the centrality of self-consciousness in human sapience by Immanuel Kant. For that is the position . . . that Hegel is building on and transforming in the direction just suggested. (4–5)

Pippin goes on to specify the problem of what Hegel called Geist as follows:

For each subject, this . . . raises the question of whether one’s existence as a living natural being is paramount, or whether one will ascribe to oneself the authority to determine the fate of one’s existence as a subject of, not subject to, one’s life. This relation to natural life and so the distinct status of a human subject is . . . something that must be achieved. . . . Genuine human mindedness, the soul, spirit, the variety of designations for the distinctly human, are all going to be read through the prism of this idea that such a distinction is fundamentally a result, what will eventually emerge as a historical achievement. . . .

[The choice of] life as a value . . . constitutes (ultimately), we might say, the modern or bourgeois form of life. . . . Hegel explains that [we] are in a position to understand that the stark opposition between attachment to or independence from life is a false opposition, and can begin the slow work or “labor of the Concept” in freeing [ourselves] from [our] natural dependence. . . . In this context, one can understand how and why Hegel thinks of human freedom as a historical and social achievement, not a metaphysical or any other sort of property of the human as such. And all of us are well aware of the extraordinarily powerful impact such a notion would have outside of philosophy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (86–87)

12 Max Horkheimer, “The Little Man and the Philosophy of Freedom,” *Dawn and Decline, Notes 1926-31 & 1950-69*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury, 1978), 50-52. Horkheimer begins by stating that, “In socialism, freedom is to become a reality. But because the present system is called ‘free’ and considered liberal, it is not terribly clear what this may mean” (50). Horkheimer’s two-page aphorism contains so many valuable formulations key to his interpretation of Marxism that it is worth citing practically in its entirety.
material redistribution or “social justice,” championing the working class and other oppressed groups, whereas it should be seen as a philosophy of freedom. There is a fundamentally different problem at stake in either regarding capitalism as a materially oppressive force, as a problem of exploitation, or as a problem of human freedom. The question of freedom raises the issue of possibilities for radical social-historical transformation, which was central to Adorno’s thought.\textsuperscript{13}

2. Adorno’s Leninism

Adorno, who was born in 1903 and lived until 1969, has a continuing purchase on problems of politics on the Left by virtue of his critical engagement with two crucial periods in the history of the Left: the 1930s “Old” Left and the 1960s “New Left.” Adorno’s critical theory, spanning this historical interval of the mid-20th century, can help make sense of the problems of the combined and ramified legacy of both periods.

Adorno is the key thinker for understanding 20th century Marxism and its discontents. As T. J. Clark has put it (in “Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?,” 2003),


Although there were no fully-fledged ideas of “revolution” in the modern sense before the late seventeenth century, there were patterns of thinking about possible radical transformations in the human world that would bring about qualitatively new forms of human life. Many of these, however, are encountered in the realm of religion. Thus early Christianity certainly had the sense of that the unique historical event of Christ’s Incarnation was the advent of a radically and qualitative new possible way of being human. (106) . . .

The members of the Frankfurt School took a Hegelian view of human society that construes it as a self-reflexive, historically developing totality that is, the beliefs and attitudes people in the society have about themselves is an integral part of the society. (118)
Adorno “[spent a lifetime] building ever more elaborate conceptual trenches to outflank the Third International.” The period of Adorno’s life, coming of age in the 1920s, in the wake of the failed international anticapitalist revolution that had opened in Russia in 1917 and continued but was defeated in Germany, Hungary and Italy in 1919, and living through the darkest periods of fascism and war in the mid-20th century to the end of the 1960s, profoundly informed his critical theory. As he put it in the introduction to the last collection of his essays he edited for publication before he died, he sought to bring together “philosophical speculation and drastic experience.” Adorno reflected on his “drastic” historical experience through the immanent critique, the critique from within, of Marxism. Adorno thought Marxism had failed as an emancipatory politics but still demanded redemption, and that this could be achieved only on the basis of Marxism itself. Adorno’s critical theory was a Marxist critique of Marxism, and as such reveals key aspects of Marxism that had otherwise become buried, as a function of the degenerations Marxism suffered from the 1930s through the 1960s. Several of Adorno’s writings, from the 1930s–40s and the 1960s, illustrate the abiding concerns of his critical theory throughout this period.

By the 1930s, with the triumph of Stalinist and social-democratic reformist politics in the workers’ movement, on the defensive against fascism, Marxism had degenerated into an ideology merely affirming the interests of the working class, Marx himself had started out with a perspective on what he called the necessity of the working class’s own self-abolition (Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, 1843).
Marx inquired into the potential overcoming of historical conditions of possibility for labor as the justification for social existence, which is how he understood capitalist society. Marx’s point was to elucidate the possibilities for overcoming labor as a social form. But Marx thought that this could only happen in and through the working class’s own political activity. How was it possible that the working class would abolish itself?

**Politics not pre-figurative**

Mahatma Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” This ethic of “pre-figuration,” the attempt to personally embody the principles of an emancipated world, was the classic expression of the moral problem of politics in service of radical social change in the 20th century. During the mid-20th century Cold War between the “liberal-democratic” West led by the United States and the Soviet Union, otherwise known as the Union of Workers’ Councils Socialist Republics, the contrasting examples of Gandhi, leader of non-violent resistance to British colonialism in India, and Lenin, leader of the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and of the international Communist movement inspired by it, were widely used to pose two very different models for understanding the politics of emancipation. One was seen as ethical, remaining true to its intentions, while the other was not. Why would Adorno, like any Marxist, have chosen Lenin over Gandhi? Adorno’s understanding of capitalism, what constituted it and what allowed it to reproduce itself as a social form, informed what he thought would be necessary, in theory and practice, to actually overcome it, in freedom.

14 See, for instance, Louis Fischer’s two complementary biographies, on Lenin (1964) and Gandhi (1950).
It is helpful to address the discussion of this problem by Leon Trotsky, who had been the 26 year-old leader of the Petersburg Soviet or Workers’ Council during the 1905 Revolution in Russia. Trotsky wrote a chapter on the “pre-requisites of socialism” in his 1906 pamphlet *Results and Prospects*, where he addressed the issue of achieving what he called “socialist psychology,” as follows:

Marxism converted socialism into a science, but this does not prevent some “Marxists” from converting Marxism into a Utopia. . . .

[M]any socialist ideologues (ideologues in the bad sense of the word — those who stand everything on its head) speak of preparing the proletariat for socialism in the sense of its being morally regenerated. The proletariat, and even “humanity” in general, must first of all cast out its old egoistical nature, and altruism must become predominant in social life, etc. As we are as yet far from such a state of affairs, and “human nature” changes very slowly, socialism is put off for several centuries. Such a point of view probably seems very realistic and evolutionary, and so forth, but as a matter of fact it is really nothing but shallow moralizing.

It is assumed that a socialist psychology must be developed before the coming of socialism, in other words that it is possible for the masses to acquire a socialist psychology under capitalism. One must not confuse here the conscious striving towards socialism with socialist psychology. The latter presupposes the absence of egotistical motives in economic life;
whereas the striving towards socialism and the struggle for it arise from
the class psychology of the proletariat. However many points of contact
there may be between the class psychology of the proletariat and classless
socialist psychology, nevertheless a deep chasm divides them.

The joint struggle against exploitation engenders splendid shoots
of idealism, comradely solidarity and self-sacrifice, but at the same time
the individual struggle for existence, the ever-yawning abyss of poverty,
the differentiation in the ranks of the workers themselves, the pressure of
the ignorant masses from below, and the corrupting influence of the
bourgeois parties do not permit these splendid shoots to develop fully. For
all that, in spite of his remaining philistinely egoistic, and without his
exceeding in “human” worth the average representative of the bourgeois
classes, the average worker knows from experience that his simplest
requirements and natural desires can be satisfied only on the ruins of the
capitalist system.

The idealists picture the distant future generation which shall have
become worthy of socialism exactly as Christians picture the members of
the first Christian communes.

Whatever the psychology of the first proselytes of Christianity may
have been — we know from the Acts of the Apostles of cases of
embezzlement of communal property — in any case, as it became more
widespread, Christianity not only failed to regenerate the souls of all the people, but itself degenerated, became materialistic and bureaucratic; from the practice of fraternal teaching one of another it changed into papalism, from wandering beggary into monastic parasitism; in short, not only did Christianity fail to subject to itself the social conditions of the milieu in which it spread, but it was itself subjected by them. This did not result from the lack of ability or the greed of the fathers and teachers of Christianity, but as a consequence of the inexorable laws of the dependence of human psychology upon the conditions of social life and labour, and the fathers and teachers of Christianity showed this dependence in their own persons.

If socialism aimed at creating a new human nature within the limits of the old society it would be nothing more than a new edition of the moralistic utopias. Socialism does not aim at creating a socialist psychology as a pre-requisite to socialism but at creating socialist conditions of life as a pre-requisite to socialist psychology. [Leon Trotsky, *Results and Prospects* (1906), in The Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects 3rd edition (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1969), 82, 97–99.]

In this passage, Trotsky expressed a view common to the Marxism of that era, which Adorno summed up in a 1936 letter to Walter Benjamin as follows:
[The] proletariat . . . is itself a product of bourgeois society. . . . [T]he actual consciousness of actual workers . . . [has] absolutely no advantage over the bourgeois except . . . interest in the revolution, but otherwise bear[s] all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character. . . . [W]e maintain our solidarity with the proletariat instead of making of our own necessity a virtue of the proletariat, as we are always tempted to do — the proletariat which itself experiences the same necessity and needs us for knowledge as much as we need the proletariat to make the revolution . . . a true accounting of the relationship of the intellectuals to the working class.\textsuperscript{15}

Adorno’s philosophical idea of the “non-identity” of social being and consciousness, of practice and theory, of means and ends, is related to this, what he called the priority or “preponderance” of the “object.” Society needed to be changed before consciousness.

Adorno’s thought was preceded by Georg Lukács’s treatment of the problem of “reification,” or “reified consciousness.” Citing Lenin, Lukács wrote, on “The Standpoint of the Proletariat,” the third section of his 1923 essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” that,

Reification is . . . the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society. It can be overcome only by constant and constantly renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence by concretely relating to the concretely manifested contradictions of the total

development, by becoming conscious of the immanent meanings of these contradictions for the total development. But it must be emphasized that . . . the structure can be disrupted only if the immanent contradictions of the process are made conscious. Only when the consciousness of the proletariat is able to point out the road along which the dialectics of history is objectively impelled, but which it cannot travel unaided, will the consciousness of the proletariat awaken to a consciousness of the process, and only then will the proletariat become the identical subject-object of history whose praxis will change reality. If the proletariat fails to take this step the contradiction will remain unresolved and will be reproduced by the dialectical mechanics of history at a higher level, in an altered form and with increased intensity. It is in this that the objective necessity of history consists. The deed of the proletariat can never be more than to take the next step in the process. Whether it is “decisive” or “episodic” depends on the concrete circumstances [of this on-going struggle.] \(^\text{16}\)

Lukács thought that,

Lenin’s achievement is that he rediscovered this side of Marxism that points the way to an understanding of its practical core. His constantly reiterated warning to seize the “next link” in the chain with all one’s might, that link on which the fate of the totality depends in that one

moment, his dismissal of all utopian demands, i.e. his “relativism” and his “Realpolitik:” all these things are nothing less than the practical realisation of the young Marx’s [1845] *Theses on Feuerbach*.17

In his third “Thesis” on Feuerbach, Marx wrote that,

*The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice.*18

So, what, for Adorno, counted as “revolutionary practice,” and what is the role of “critical theory,” and, hence, the role of Marxist “intellectuals,” in relation to this?

**Political role of intellectuals**

In his 1936 letter to Benjamin, Adorno pointed out that,

[I]f [one] legitimately interpret[s] technical progress and alienation in a dialectical fashion, without doing the same in equal measure for the world

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17 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 221n60.
of objectified subjectivity... then the political effect of this is to credit the proletariat directly with an achievement which, according to Lenin, it can only accomplish through the theory introduced by intellectuals as dialectical subjects. . . . “Les extrèmes me touchent” [“The extremes touch me” (André Gide)] . . . but only if the dialectic of the lowest has the same value as the dialectic of the highest. . . . Both bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change. . . . Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up. It would be romantic to sacrifice one to the other . . . [as] with that romantic anarchism which places blind trust in the spontaneous powers of the proletariat within the historical process — a proletariat which is itself a product of bourgeois society.19

This conception of the dialectic of the “extremes” was developed by Adorno in two writings of the 1940s, “Reflections on Class Theory,” and “Imaginative Excesses.” In these writings, Adorno drew upon not only Marx and the best in the history of Marxist politics, but also the critical-theoretical digestion of this politics by Lukács.

In his 1920 essay on “Class Consciousness,” Lukács wrote that,

Only the consciousness of the proletariat can point to the way that leads out of the impasse of capitalism. As long as this consciousness is lacking, the crisis remains permanent, it goes back to its starting-point, repeats the

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cycle until after infinite sufferings and terrible detours the school of history completes the education of the proletariat and confers upon it the leadership of mankind. But the proletariat is not given any choice. As Marx says, it must become a class not only “as against capital” but also “for itself;” that is to say, the class struggle must be raised from the level of economic necessity to the level of conscious aim and effective class consciousness. The pacifists and humanitarians of the class struggle whose efforts tend whether they will or no to retard this lengthy, painful and crisis-ridden process would be horrified if they could but see what sufferings they inflict on the proletariat by extending this course of education. But the proletariat cannot abdicate its mission. The only question at issue is how much it has to suffer before it achieves ideological maturity, before it acquires a true understanding of its class situation and a true class consciousness.

Of course this uncertainty and lack of clarity are themselves the symptoms of the crisis in bourgeois society. As the product of capitalism the proletariat must necessarily be subject to the modes of existence of its creator. This mode of existence is inhumanity and reification. No doubt the very existence of the proletariat implies criticism and the negation of this form of life. But until the objective crisis of capitalism has matured and until the proletariat has achieved true class consciousness, and the
ability to understand the crisis fully, it cannot go beyond the criticism of
reification and so it is only negatively superior to its antagonist. . . .
Indeed, if it can do no more than negate some aspects of capitalism, if it
cannot at least aspire to a critique of the whole, then it will not even
achieve a negative superiority. . . .

The reified consciousness must also remain hopelessly trapped in
the two extremes of crude empiricism and abstract utopianism. In the one
case, consciousness becomes either a completely passive observer moving
in obedience to laws which it can never control. In the other it regards
itself as a power which is able of its own — subjective — volition to
master the essentially meaningless motion of objects.20

In “The Standpoint of the Proletariat,” Lukács elaborated further that,

[T]here arises what at first sight seems to be the paradoxical situation that
this projected, mythological world [of capital] seems closer to
consciousness than does the immediate reality. But the paradox dissolves
as soon as we remind ourselves that we must abandon the standpoint of
immediacy and solve the problem if immediate reality is to be mastered in
truth. Whereas[,] mythology is simply the reproduction in imagination of
the problem in its insolubility. Thus immediacy is merely reinstated on a
higher level. . . .

20 Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 76–77.
Of course, [the alternative of] “indeterminism” does not lead to a way out of the difficulty for the individual. . . . [It is] nothing but the acquisition of that margin of “freedom” that the conflicting claims and irrationality of the reified laws can offer the individual in capitalist society. It ultimately turns into a mystique of intuition which leaves the fatalism of the external reified world even more intact than before[,]
[despite having] rebelled in the name of “humanism” against the tyranny of the “law.” . . .

Even worse, having failed to perceive that man in his negative immediacy was a moment in a dialectical process, such a philosophy, when consciously directed toward the restructuring of society, is forced to distort the social reality in order to discover the positive side, man as he exists, in one of its manifestations. . . . In support of this we may cite as a typical illustration the well-known passage [from Marx’s great adversary, the German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle]: “There is no social way that leads out of this social situation. The vain efforts of things to behave like human beings can be seen in the English [labor] strikes whose melancholy outcome is familiar enough. The only way out for the workers is to be found in that sphere within which they can still be human beings . . . .”

[I]t is important to establish that the abstract and absolute separation[,] . . . the rigid division between man as thing, on the one hand,
and *man as man*, on the other, is not without consequences. . . [T]his means that every path leading to a change in this reality is systematically blocked.

This disintegration of a dialectical, practical unity into an inorganic aggregate of the empirical and the utopian, a clinging to the “facts” (in their untranscended immediacy) and a faith in illusions[,] as alien to the past as to the present[,] is characteristic. . . .

The danger to which the proletariat has been exposed since its appearance on the historical stage was that it might remain imprisoned in its immediacy together with the bourgeoisie.21

In “Reflections on Class Theory,” Adorno provided a striking re-interpretation of Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* as a theory of emancipation from history:

According to [Marxian] theory, history is the history of class struggles.

But the concept of class is bound up with the [historical] emergence of the proletariat. . . . By extending the concept of class to prehistory, theory denounces not just the bourgeois . . . [but] turns against prehistory itself. . . . By exposing the historical necessity that had brought capitalism into being, [the critique of] political economy became the critique of history as a whole. . . . All history is the history of class struggles because it was always the same thing, namely, prehistory. . . . This means, however, that the dehumanization is also its opposite. . . . Only when the victims

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completely assume the features of the ruling civilization will they be
capable of wresting them from the dominant power.22

Adorno elaborated this further in the aphorism “Imaginative Excesses,” which was orphaned from the published version of Adorno’s book *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1944–47). Adorno wrote that,

> Those schooled in dialectical theory are reluctant to indulge in positive images of the proper society, of its members, even of those who would accomplish it. . . . The leap into the future, clean over the conditions of the present, lands in the past. In other words: ends and means cannot be formulated in isolation from each other. Dialectics will have no truck with the maxim that the former justify the latter, no matter how close it seems to come to the doctrine of the ruse of reason or, for that matter, the subordination of individual spontaneity to party discipline. The belief that the blind play of means could be summarily displaced by the sovereignty of rational ends was bourgeois utopianism. It is the antithesis of means and ends itself that should be criticized. Both are reified in bourgeois thinking. . . . [Their] petrified antithesis holds good for the world that produced it, but not for the effort to change it. Solidarity can call on us to subordinate not only individual interests but even our better insight. . . . Hence the precariousness of any statement about those on whom the

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transformation depends. . . . The dissident wholly governed by the end is
today in any case so thoroughly despised by friend and foe as an “idealistic”
and daydreamer. . . . Certainly, however, no more faith can be placed in
those equated with the means; the subjectless beings whom historical
wrong has robbed of the strength to right it, adapted to technology and
unemployment, conforming and squalid, hard to distinguish from the
wind-jackets of fascism: their actual state disclaims the idea that puts its
trust in them. Both types are theatre masks of class society projected on to
the night-sky of the future . . . on one hand the abstract rigorist, helplessly
striving to realize chimeras, and on the other the subhuman creature who
as dishonour’s progeny shall never be allowed to avert it.

What the rescuers would be like cannot be prophesied without
obscurring their image with falsehood. . . . What can be perceived,
however, is what they will not be like: neither personalities nor bundles of
reflexes, but least of all a synthesis of the two, hardboiled realists with a
sense of higher things. When the constitution of human beings has grown
adapted to social antagonisms heightened to the extreme, the humane
constitution sufficient to hold antagonism in check will be mediated by the
extremes, not an average mingling of the two. The bearers of technical
progress, now still mechanized mechanics, will, in evolving their special
abilities, reach the point already indicated by technology where
specialization grows superfluous. Once their consciousness has been converted into pure means without any qualification, it may cease to be a means and breach, with its attachment to particular objects, the last heteronomous barrier; its last entrapment in the existing state, the last fetishism of the status quo, including that of its own self, which is dissolved in its radical implementation as an instrument. Drawing breath at last, it may grow aware of the incongruence between its rational development and the irrationality of its ends, and act accordingly.

At the same time, however, the producers are more than ever thrown back on theory, to which the idea of a just condition evolves in their own medium, self-consistent thought, by virtue of insistent self-criticism. The class division of society is also maintained by those who oppose class society: following the schematic division of physical and mental labour, they split themselves up into workers and intellectuals. This division cripples the practice which is called for. It cannot be arbitrarily set aside. But while those professionally concerned with things of the mind are themselves turned more and more into technicians, the growing opacity of capitalist mass society makes an association between intellectuals who still are such, with workers who still know themselves to be such, more timely than thirty years ago [at the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution]. . . . Today, when the concept of the proletariat, unshaken in
its economic essence, is so occluded by technology that in the greatest industrial country [the United States of America] there can be no question of proletarian class-consciousness, the role of intellectuals would no longer be to alert the torpid to their most obvious interests, but to strip the veil from the eyes of the wise-guys, the illusion that capitalism, which makes them its temporary beneficiaries, is based on anything other than their exploitation and oppression. The deluded workers are directly dependent on those who can still just see and tell of their delusion. Their hatred of intellectuals has changed accordingly. It has aligned itself to the prevailing commonsense views. The masses no longer mistrust intellectuals because they betray the revolution, but because they might want it, and thereby reveal how great is their own need of intellectuals. Only if the extremes come together will humanity survive.23

The problem of means and ends

A principal trope Stalinophobic Cold War liberalism in the 20th century was the idea that Bolshevism thought that the “ends justify the means,” in some Machiavellian manner, that Leninists were willing to do anything to achieve socialism. This made a mockery not only of the realities of socialist politics up to that time, but also of the self-conscious relation within Marxism itself between theory and practice, what came to be known as “alienation.” Instead, Marxism became an example for the liberal caveat, supposedly

according to Kant, that something “may be true in theory but not in practice.” Marxist politics had historically succumbed to the theory-practice problem, but that does not mean that Marxists had been unaware of this problem, nor that Marxist theory had not developed a self-understanding of what it means to inhabit and work through this problem.

As Adorno put it in his 1966 book *Negative Dialectics*,

> The liquidation of theory by dogmatization and thought taboos contributed to the bad practice. . . . The interrelation of both moments [of theory and practice] is not settled once and for all but fluctuates historically. . . . Those who chide theory [for being] anachronistic obey the *topos* of dismissing, as obsolete, what remains painful [because it was] thwarted. . . . The fact that history has rolled over certain positions will be respected as a verdict on their truth content only by those who agree with Schiller that “world history is the world tribunal.” What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations.24

What this meant for Adorno is that past emancipatory politics could not be superseded or rendered irrelevant the degree to which they remained unfulfilled. A task could be forgotten but it would continue to task the present. This means an inevitable return to it. The most broad-gauged question raised by this approach is the degree to which we may

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still live under capital in the way Marx understood it. If Marx’s work is still able to
provoke critical recognition of our present realities, then we are tasked to grasp the ways
it continues to do so. This is not merely a matter of theoretical “analysis,” however, but
also raises issues of practical politics. This means inquiring into the ways Marx
understood the relation of theory and practice, most especially his own. Adorno thought
that this was not a matter of simply emulating Marx’s political practice or theoretical
perspectives, but rather trying to grasp the relation of theory and practice under changed
conditions.

This articulated non-identity, antagonism and even contradiction of theory and
practice, observable in the history of Marxism most of all, was not taken to be defeating
for Adorno, but was in fact precisely where Marxism pointed acutely to the problem of
freedom in capital, and how it might be possible to transform and transcend it. Adorno
put it this way, in a late, posthumously published essay from 1969, “Marginalia to Theory
and Praxis,” inspired by his conflicts with both student activists and his old friend and
colleague Herbert Marcuse, who he thought had regressed to a Romantic rejection of
capital:

If, to make an exception for once, one risks what is called a grand
perspective, beyond the historical differences in which the concepts of
theory and praxis have their life, one discovers the infinitely progressive
aspect of the separation of theory and praxis, which was deplored by the
Romantics and denounced by the Socialists in their wake — except for the mature Marx.  

As Adorno put it in a [May 5, 1969] letter to Marcuse,

[T]here are moments in which theory is pushed on further by practice. But such a situation neither exists objectively today, nor does the barren and brutal practicism that confronts us here have the slightest thing to do with theory anyhow. [Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence on the German Student Movement,” trans. Esther Leslie, New Left Review I/233, Jan.–Feb. 1999, 127.]

In his final published essay, “Resignation” (1969), which became a kind of testament, Adorno pointed out that,

Even political undertakings can sink into pseudo-activities, into theater. It is no coincidence that the ideals of immediate action, even the propaganda of the [deed], have been resurrected after the willing integration of formerly progressive organizations that now in all countries of the earth are developing the characteristic traits of what they once opposed. Yet this does not invalidate the [Marxist] critique of anarchism. Its return is that of a ghost. The impatience with [Marxian] theory that manifests itself with its

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return does not advance thought beyond itself. By forgetting thought, the
impatience falls back below it.\textsuperscript{26}

This is almost a direct paraphrase of Lenin, who wrote in his 1920 pamphlet \textit{“Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder”}\nthat,

[D]riven to frenzy by the horrors of capitalism . . . anarchism is
characteristic of all capitalist countries. The instability of such
revolutionism, its barrenness, and its tendency to turn rapidly into
submission, apathy, phantasms, and even a frenzied infatuation with one
bourgeois fad or another — all this is common knowledge. . . .

Anarchism was not infrequently a kind of penalty for the opportunist sins
of the working-class movement. The two monstrosities complemented
each other.\textsuperscript{27}

Adorno paralleled Lenin’s discussion of the “phantasms” of non-Marxian socialism, and
defense of a Marxist approach, stating that, “Thought, enlightenment conscious of itself,
threatens to disenchant the pseudo-reality within which actionism moves.” Immediately
prior to Adorno’s comment on anarchism, he discussed the antinomy of spontaneity and
organization, as follows,

Pseudo-activity is generally the attempt to rescue enclaves of immediacy
in the midst of a thoroughly mediated and rigidified society. Such attempts
are rationalized by saying that the small change is one step in the long path


toward the transformation of the whole. The disastrous model of pseudo-activity is the “do-it-yourself.” . . . The do-it-yourself approach in politics is not completely of the same caliber [as the quasi-rational purpose of inspiring in the unfree individuals, paralyzed in their spontaneity, the assurance that everything depends on them]. The society that impenetrably confronts people is nonetheless these very people. The trust in the limited action of small groups recalls the spontaneity that withers beneath the encrusted totality and without which this totality cannot become something different. The administered world has the tendency to strangle all spontaneity, or at least to channel it into pseudo-activities. At least this does not function as smoothly as the agents of the administered world would hope. However, spontaneity should not be absolutized, just as little as it should be split off from the objective situation or idolized the way the administered world itself is.28

Adorno’s poignant defense of Marxism was expressed most pithily in the final lines with which his “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” concludes, that,

Marx by no means surrendered himself to praxis. Praxis is a source of power for theory but cannot be prescribed by it. It appears in theory merely, and indeed necessarily, as a blind spot, as an obsession with what

it being criticized. . . . This admixture of delusion, however, warns of the excesses in which it incessantly grows.29 Marxism is both true and untrue; the question is how one recognizes its truth and untruth, and the necessity — the inevitability — of its being both.

Adorno acknowledged his indebtedness to the best of historical Marxism when he wrote that,

The theorist who intervenes in practical controversies nowadays discovers on a regular basis and to his shame that whatever ideas he might contribute were expressed long ago — and usually better the first time around.30

The politics of Critical Theory

The political origins of Frankfurt School Critical Theory have remained opaque, for several reasons, not least the taciturn character of the major writings of its figures. The motivation for such reticence on the part of the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists is itself what requires explanation, why they engaged in self-censorship and encryption of their ideas, and consigned themselves to writing “messages in a bottle” without immediate or definite addressee. As Horkheimer put it, the danger was in speaking like

an “oracle;” he asked simply, “To whom shall we say these things?”31 It was not simply due to American exile in the Nazi era or post-WWII Cold War exigency. Some of their ideas were expressed explicitly enough. Rather, the collapse of the Marxist Left in which the Critical Theorists’ thought had been formed, in the wake of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia and the German Revolution and civil war of 1918–19, deeply affected their perspective on political possibilities in their historical moment. The question is, in what way was this Marxism?

A series of conversations between the leaders of the Frankfurt Institute, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, in 1956, at the height of the Cold War and after Khrushchev’s public admission of the crimes of the Stalin era, provide insight into their thinking and how they understood their situation in the trajectory of Marxism in the 20th century. Selections from the transcript were recently published in New Left Review (2010), under the title “Towards a New Manifesto?” The German publication of the complete transcript, in Horkheimer’s collected works, is under the title “Discussion about Theory and Praxis,” and their discussion was indeed in consideration of re-writing the Communist Manifesto in light of intervening history. Within a few years of this, Adorno began but abandoned work on a critique of the German Social-Democratic Party’s Godesberg programme, which officially renounced Marxism in 1959, on the model of Marx’s celebrated critique of the Gotha Programme that had founded the SPD in 1875. So, especially Adorno, but also Horkheimer had been deeply concerned with the question

of continuing the project of Marxism, well into the later, post-WWII period of the Institute’s work. In the series of conversations between Horkheimer and Adorno recorded by Adorno’s wife Gretel from March to April 1956, Adorno expressed his interest in re-writing the *Communist Manifesto* along what he called “strictly Leninist” lines. Horkheimer did not object, but only pointed out that such a document, calling for what he called the “re-establishment of a socialist party,” “could not appear in Russia, while in the United States and Germany it would be worthless.”32 Nonetheless, Horkheimer felt it was necessary to show “why one can be a communist and yet despise the Russians.”33 As Horkheimer put it, simply, “Theory is, as it were, one of humanity’s tools.”34 Thus, they tasked themselves to try to continue Marxism, if only as “theory.”

Now, it is precisely the supposed turning away from political practice and retreat into theory that many commentators have characterized as the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists’ abandonment of Marxism. For instance, Martin Jay, in *The Dialectical Imagination*, or Phil Slater, in his book offering a “Marxist interpretation” of the Frankfurt School, characterized matters in such terms: Marxism could not be supposed to exist as mere theory, but had to be tied to practice. But this was not a problem new to the Frankfurt Institute in exile, that is, after being forced to abandon their work in collaboration with the Soviet Marx-Engels Institute, for example, which was as much due to Stalinism as Nazism. Rather, it pointed back to what Karl Korsch, a foundational

33. “Towards a New Manifesto?,” 57.
34. “Towards a New Manifesto?,” 57.
figure for the Institute, wrote in 1923, that the crisis of Marxism, that is, the problems that
had already manifested in the era of the 2nd International in the late 19th century (the so-
called “Revisionist Dispute”) and developed and culminated in the collapse of the 2nd
Intl. and the division in Marxism in WWI and the revolutions that followed, meant that
the “umbilical cord” between theory and practice had been already “broken.” Marxism
stood in need of a transformation, in both theory and practice, but this transformation
could only happen as a function of not only practice but also theory. They suffered the
same fate. For Korsch in 1923, as well as for Georg Lukács in this same period, in
writings seminal for the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg
were exemplary of the attempt to rearticulate Marxist theory and practice. Lenin in
particular, as Lukács characterized him, the “theoretician of practice,” provided a key,
indeed the crucial figure, in political action and theoretical self-understanding, of the
problem Marxism faced at that historical moment. As Adorno put it in the conversation
with Horkheimer in 1956, “I have always wanted to . . . develop a theory that remains
faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin.” So, the question becomes, “faithful” in what way?

Several statements in two writings by Horkheimer and Adorno’s colleague,
Herbert Marcuse, his “33 Theses” from 1947, and his book Soviet Marxism from 1958,
can help shed light on the orientation of the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists towards
the prior politics of “Communism,” specifically of Lenin. Additionally, several letters
from Adorno to Horkheimer and Benjamin in the late 1930s explicate Adorno’s positive
attitude towards Lenin. Finally, writings from Adorno’s last year, 1969, the “Marginalia
to Theory and Praxis” and “Resignation,” restated and further specified the content of his “Leninism” in light of his critique of the 1960s New Left. The challenge is to recognize the content of such “Leninism” that might otherwise appear obscure or idiosyncratic, but actually points back to the politics of the early 20th century that was formative of Adorno and his cohort’s historical perspective. Then, the question becomes, what was the significance of such a perspective in the later period of Adorno’s life? How did such “Leninism” retain purchase under changed conditions, such that Adorno could bring it to bear, critically, up to the end of his life? Furthermore, what could Adorno’s perspective on “Leninism” reveal about Lenin himself? Why and how did Adorno remain a Marxist, and how did Lenin figure in this?

One clear explanation for Adorno’s “Leninism” was the importance of consciousness in Adorno’s estimation of potential for emancipatory social transformation. For instance, in a letter to Horkheimer critical of Erich Fromm’s more humane approach to Freudian psychoanalysis, Adorno wrote that Fromm demonstrated a mixture of social democracy and anarchism . . . [and] a severe lack of . . . dialectics . . . [in] the concept of authority, without which, after all, neither Lenin’s [vanguard] nor dictatorship can be conceived of. I would strongly advise him to read Lenin.

Adorno thought that Fromm thus threatened to deploy something of what he called the “trick used by bourgeois individualists against Marx,” and wrote to Horkheimer that he
considered this to be a “real threat to the line . . . which the [Frankfurt Institute’s] journal
takes.”35

But the political role of an intellectual, theoretically informed “vanguard” is liable
to the common criticism of Leninism’s tendency towards an oppressive domination over
rather than critical facilitation of social emancipation. A more complicated apprehension
of the role of consciousness in the historical transformation of society can be found in
Adorno’s correspondence on Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of
Mechanical Reproduction” in 1936. There, Adorno commended Benjamin’s work for
providing an account of the relationship of intellectuals to workers along the lines of
Lenin. As Adorno put it in his letter to Benjamin,

The proletariat . . . is itself a product of bourgeois society. . . . [T]he
actual consciousness of actual workers . . . [has] absolutely no advantage
over the bourgeois except . . . interest in the revolution, but otherwise
bear[s] all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character. . . .
We maintain our solidarity with the proletariat instead of making of our
own necessity a virtue of the proletariat, as we are always tempted to do
— the proletariat which itself experiences the same necessity and needs us
for knowledge as much as we need the proletariat to make the revolution.

I am convinced that the further development of the . . . debate you have so

Moreover, Adorno wrote that, “If one is concerned to achieve what might be possible with human beings, it
is extremely difficult to remain friendly towards real people . . . a pretext for approving of precisely that
element in people by which they prove themselves to be not merely their own victims but virtually their
magnificently inaugurated [in the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”] depends essentially on a true accounting of the relationship of the intellectuals to the working class. . . . [Your essay is] among the profoundest and most powerful statements of political theory that I have encountered since I read [Lenin’s] The State and Revolution.

Adorno likely had in mind as well Lenin’s What is to be Done? or, even especially, his post-revolutionary pamphlet “Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder. In the former, Lenin (in)famously distinguished between “trade union” and “socialist consciousness.” But in the later work, Lenin described the persistent “bourgeois” social conditions of intellectual work per se that would long survive the proletarian socialist revolution, indeed (reiterating from What is to be Done?) that workers became thoroughly “bourgeois” by virtue of the very activity of intellectual work (such as in journalism or art production), including and perhaps especially in their activity as Communist Party political cadre. For Lenin, workers’ political revolution meant governing what would remain an essentially bourgeois society. The revolution would make the workers for the first time, so to speak, entirely bourgeois, which was the precondition of their leading society beyond bourgeois conditions.36 It was a moment,

36. Lenin wrote, in “Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder (1920), that,

Let us take, say, journalistic work. Newspapers, pamphlets and leaflets perform the indispensable work of propaganda, agitation and organisation. No mass movement in any country at all civilised can get along without a journalistic apparatus. No outcries against “leaders” or solemn vows to keep the masses uncontaminated by the influence of leaders will relieve us of the necessity of using, for this work, people from a bourgeois-
the next necessary step, in the workers’ self-overcoming, in the emancipatory
transformation of society, in, through and beyond capital. Marxism was not extrinsic but
intrinsic to this process, as the workers’ movement itself was. As Adorno put it to
Horkheimer,

It could be said that Marx and Hegel taught that there are no ideals in the
abstract, but that the ideal always lies in the next step, that the entire thing
cannot be grasped directly but only indirectly by means of the next step.\textsuperscript{37}

Lukács had mentioned this about Lenin, in a footnote to his 1923 essay in \textit{History and
Class Consciousness}, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” that,

Lenin’s achievement is that he rediscovered this side of Marxism that
points the way to an understanding of its \textit{practical} core. His constantly
reiterated warning to seize the “next link” in the chain with all one’s
might, that link on which the fate of the totality depends in that one
moment, his dismissal of all utopian demands, i.e. his “relativism” and his

\footnotesize{intellectual environment or will rid us of the bourgeois-democratic, “private property”
atmosphere and environment in which this work is carried out under capitalism. Even
two and a half years after the overthrow of the bourgeoisie [in Russia], after the conquest
of political power by the proletariat, we still have this atmosphere around us, this
environment of mass (. . . artisan) bourgeois-democratic private property relations. . . .
The most shameless careerism . . . and vulgar petty-bourgeois conservatism are all
unquestionably common and prevalent features engendered everywhere by capitalism,
not only outside but also within the working-class movement. . . . [T]he overthrow of the
bourgeoisie and the conquest of political power by the proletariat — [creates] \textit{these very
same} difficulties on a still larger, an infinitely larger scale.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{37} Adorno and Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto?,” 54.}
“Realpolitik:” all these things are nothing less than the practical realisation of the young Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*.38

But this was not fully achieved in the Revolution that began to unfold from 1917 to 1919 in Russia, Germany, Hungary, and Italy, but was cut short of attaining the politics of the socialist transformation of society. Thirty years later, in the context of the dawning Cold War following the defeat of the Nazis in WWII, Marcuse’s “33 Theses” tried to take stock of the legacy of the crisis of Marxism and the failure of the revolution:

[Thesis 3:] [T]o uphold without compromise orthodox Marxist theory . . .

[—] [i]n the face of political reality such a position would be powerless, abstract and unpolitical, but when the political reality as a whole is false, the unpolitical position may be the only political truth. . . .

[Thesis 32:] [T]he political workers’ party remains the necessary subject of revolution. In the original Marxist conception, the party does not play a decisive role. Marx assumed that the proletariat is driven to revolutionary action on its own, based on the knowledge of its own interests, as soon as revolutionary conditions are present. . . . [But subsequent] development has confirmed the correctness of the Leninist conception of the vanguard party as the subject of the revolution. It is true that the communist parties today are not this subject, but it is just as true that only they can become it. Only in the theories of the communist

38. Note 60.
parties is the memory of the revolutionary tradition alive, which can become the memory of the revolutionary goal again. . . .

[Thesis 33:] The political task then would consist in reconstructing revolutionary theory. . . .³⁹

As Marcuse put it in 1958, in Soviet Marxism,

During the Revolution [beginning in 1917], it became clear to what degree Lenin had succeeded in basing his strategy on the actual class interests and aspirations of the workers and peasants. . . . Then, from 1923 on, the decisions of the leadership increasingly dissociated from the class interests of the proletariat. The former no longer presuppose the proletariat as a revolutionary agent but rather are imposed upon the proletariat and the rest of the underlying population.⁴⁰

Adorno’s commentary in conversation with Horkheimer in 1956, in a passage titled “Individualism,” addressed what he called the problem of subjectivity as socially constituted, which he thought Lenin had addressed more rigorously than Marx. Adorno said that,

Marx was too harmless; he probably imagined quite naïvely that human beings are basically the same in all essentials and will remain so. It would be a good idea, therefore, to deprive them of their second nature. He was not concerned with their subjectivity; he probably didn’t look into that too

closely. The idea that human beings are the products of society down to
their innermost core is an idea that he would have rejected as milieu
theory. Lenin was the first person to assert this.41

What this meant for Adorno was that the struggle to overcome the domination of society
by capital was something more and other than the class struggle of the workers against
the capitalists. It was not merely a matter of their exploitation. For it was not the case
that social subjects were products of their class position so much as bourgeois society
under capital determined all of its subjects in a historical nexus of unfreedom. Rather,
class position was an expression of the structure of this universal unfreedom. As
Horkheimer wrote, in “The Little Man and the Philosophy of Freedom,” one of his
aphoristic writings from 1926–31, published under the title Dämmerung (meaning
“Twilight,” either “Dusk” or “Dawn”),

In socialism, freedom is to become a reality. But because the present
system is called “free” and considered liberal, it is not terribly clear what
this may mean. . . .

The business man is subject to laws that neither he nor anyone else
nor any power with such a mandate created with purpose and deliberation.
They are laws which the big capitalists and perhaps he himself skillfully
make use of but whose existence must be accepted as a fact. Boom, bust,
inflation, wars and even the qualities of things and human beings the present society demands are a function of such laws, of the anonymous social reality. . . .

Bourgeois thought views this reality as superhuman. It fetishizes the social process. . . .

[T]he error is not that people do not recognize the subject but that the subject does not exist. Everything therefore depends on creating the free subject that consciously shapes social life. And this subject is nothing other than the rationally organized socialist society which regulates its own existence.

But for the little man who is turned down when he asks for a job because objective conditions make it impossible, it is most important that their origin be brought to the light of day so that they do not continue being unfavorable to him. Not only his own lack of freedom but that of others as well spells his doom. His interest lies in the Marxist clarification of the concept of freedom.42

Such a clarification of what would constitute a progressive-emancipatory approach to the problem of capital was cut short by the course of Marxism in the 20th century. It thus also became increasingly difficult to “bring to the light of day” the “origins” of persistent social conditions of unfreedom. In many respects, the crisis of Marxism had been

exacerbated but not overcome as a function of the post-WWI revolutionary aftermath. This involved a deepening of the crisis of humanity, as the Frankfurt Institute Critical Theorists were well aware that fascism as a historical phenomenon was due to the failure of Marxism. Fascism was the ill-begotten offspring of the history of Marxism itself.

From a decade after 1917, Horkheimer wrote, in a passage titled “Indications,” that,

The moral character of a person can be infallibly inferred from his response to certain questions. . . . In 1930 the attitude toward Russia casts light on people’s thinking. It is extremely difficult to say what conditions are like there. I do not claim to know where the country is going; there is undoubtedly much misery. . . . The senseless injustice of the imperialist world can certainly not be explained by technological inadequacy. Anyone who has the eyes to see will view events in Russia as the continuing painful attempt to overcome this terrible social injustice. At the very least, he will ask with a throbbing heart whether it is still under way. If appearances were to be against it, he will cling to this hope like the cancer patient to the questionable report that a cure for his illness may have been found.
When Kant received the first news of the French Revolution [of 1789], he is said to have changed the direction of his customary stroll from then on.\textsuperscript{43}

Despite what occurred in the unfolding of developments in 20th century history, Adorno never reversed course.

\textsuperscript{43} Horkheimer, \textit{Dawn and Decline}, 72–73.
3. Lenin’s liberalism

Lenin’s Marxist politics has been profoundly misconstrued and distorted, both positively and negatively, as supposedly having wanted to strip capitalist society of its deceptive veneer and assert the unadorned proletariat as the be-all and end-all of “socialist” society. Certainly not merely the later Stalinist history of the Soviet Union, but also practices of the Soviet state under Lenin’s leadership in the Civil War, so-called “War Communism,” and the Red Terror, lent themselves to a belief in Lenin as a ruthless destroyer of “bourgeois” conditions of life. But, then, what are we to make, for instance, of Lenin’s pamphlets on *The State and Revolution* and “Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder? For they emphasized both the necessary persistence of “bourgeois right” among the workers in the long transition from socialism to communism, requiring the continuation of state mediation, and the fact that Marxists had understood their effort as trying to overcome capital “on the basis of capitalism” itself. A prime example of Lenin’s insistence on the mediation of politics in society was his opposition to Trotsky’s recommendation that labor unions be militarized and subsumed under the state. Lenin wanted to preserve, rather, the important non-identity of class, party, and state in the Soviet “workers’ state,” which he recognized as necessarily carrying on, for the foreseeable future, “state capitalism” (characterized by “bureaucratic deformations” due to Russian conditions). Lenin thus wanted to preserve the possibility of politics within the working class, a theme that reached back to his first major pamphlet, *What is to be Done?*
Lenin’s “last struggle” was to prevent the strangling of politics in the Soviet state, a danger he regarded not merely in terms of Stalin’s leadership, but the condition of the Bolsheviks more generally. For instance, Lenin critically noted Trotsky’s predilection for “administrative” solutions.

Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, and Theodor Adorno, teasing out a “Hegelian” dimension to Lenin’s Marxism, derived from Lenin’s theoretical writings and political practice an elaboration of the Marxist theory of social mediation in capital, through the politics of proletarian socialism, that sought to recover Lenin from a bad utopian perspective of the desire to do away with politics altogether. Rather, such Marxist critical theory following Lenin understood overcoming the “alienation” and “reification” of capital as providing the possibility for the true practice of politics, a neglected but vital contribution Lenin made to the development of Marxism. Lenin did not attempt to destroy modern forms of political mediation, but rather to achieve the true mediation of theory and practice, in politics freed from society dominated by capital. This was the content of Lenin’s liberalism, his “dialectical” Marxist attempt, not to negate, but rather to fulfill the desiderata of bourgeois society, which capital had come to block, and which could only be worked through “immanently.”

The controversy about Lenin

Lenin is the most controversial figure in the history of Marxism, and perhaps one of the most controversial figures in all of history. As such, he is an impossible figure for sober

consideration, without polemic. Nevertheless, it has become impossible, also, after Lenin, to consider Marxism without reference to him. Broadly, Marxism is divided into avowedly “Leninist” and “anti-Leninist” tendencies. In what ways was Lenin either an advance or a calamity for Marxism? But there is another way of approaching Lenin, which is as an expression of the historical crisis of Marxism. In other words, Lenin as a historical figure is unavoidably significant as manifesting a crisis of Marxism. The question is how Lenin provided the basis for advancing that crisis, how the polarization around Lenin could provide the basis for advancing the potential transformation of Marxism, in terms of resolving certain problems. What is clear from the various ways that Lenin is usually approached is that the necessity for such transformation and advance of Marxism has been expressed only in distorted ways. For instance, the question of Marxist “orthodoxy” hinders the proper evaluation of Lenin. There was a fundamental ambiguity in the way Marxism addressed its own historical crisis, in the question of fidelity to and revision of Marx, for instance in the so-called “Revisionist Dispute” of the late 19th century. Lenin was a leading anti-revisionist or “orthodox” Marxist. This was also true of other Second International radical Marxists, such as Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky. In what ways did these figures, and above all Lenin, think that being true to Marx was required for the advancement and transformation of Marxism?

Adorno, in his 1966 book *Negative Dialectics*, wrote of the degeneration of Marxism due to “dogmatization and thought-taboos.” There is no other figure in the history of Marxism who has been subject to such “dogmatization and thought-taboos” as
much as Lenin. For Adorno, figures in the history of Marxism such as Lenin or Luxemburg or Kautsky should not be approached in terms merely of their theoretical perspectives or practical actions they took or advocated, but rather in their relation of theory and practice, or, why they thought they did what they did when they did so. As Adorno put it, theory and practice have a changing relation that “fluctuates” historically.45

Lenin, among other Marxists, thought that the political party served an important function with regard to consciousness, and wrote in *What is to be Done?* of the key “importance of the theoretical struggle” in forming such a party. Lenin thought that theory was not simply a matter of generalization from experience in terms of trial and error, as in traditional (pre-Kantian) epistemology, but, importantly, in the Hegelian “dialectical” sense of history: this is how Lenin understood “theory.” As Lenin put it, history did not advance in a line but rather in “spirals,” through repetitions and regressions, and not simple linear “progress.” In this respect, the past could be an advance on the present, or, the present could seek to attain moments of the past, but under changed conditions. And such changed conditions were themselves not to be regarded simply as “progressive.” Rather, there was an important ambivalence to history, in that it exhibited both progress and regress. In his 1915 Granat Encyclopedia entry on Karl Marx, describing “dialectics” from a Marxian perspective, Lenin wrote,

> In our times, the idea of development, of evolution, has almost completely penetrated social consciousness, only in other ways, and not through

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Hegelian philosophy. Still, this idea, as formulated by Marx and Engels on
the basis of Hegel’s philosophy, is far more comprehensive and far richer
in content than the current idea of evolution is. A development that
repeats, as it were, stages that have already been passed, but repeats them
in a different way, on a higher basis (“the negation of the negation”), a
development, so to speak, that proceeds in spirals, not in a straight line; a
development by leaps, catastrophes, and revolutions; “breaks in
continuity”; the transformation of quantity into quality; inner impulses
towards development, imparted by the contradiction and conflict of the
various forces and tendencies acting on a given body, or within a given
phenomenon, or within a given society; the interdependence and the
closest and indissoluble connection between all aspects of any
phenomenon (history constantly revealing ever new aspects), a connection
that provides a uniform, and universal process of motion, one that follows
definite laws—these are some of the features of dialectics as a doctrine of
development that is richer than the conventional one.46

With Marxism, the “crisis” of bourgeois society was recognized. The crisis of
bourgeois society circa 1848 was what Marx called “capital,” a provocative
characterization. The spiral development through which Lenin, among other Second
International radicals such as Luxemburg and Trotsky, thought that history in the modern

46. Lenin, Karl Marx: A Brief Biographical Sketch with an Exposition of Marxism, II. “The Marxist
Doctrine,” in Lenin, Collected Works vol. 21 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974). Originally published in
era had regressed through the “progress” since Marx and Engels’s time in 1848, the moment of the Communist Manifesto, showed how and why the subsequent development of Marxism sought to re-attain 1848. Was history since 1848 progress or regress? In a certain sense, it was both. In this history, bourgeois society appeared to both fulfill and negate itself. In other words, bourgeois society had become more itself than ever; in other respects, however, it grew distant from its earlier achievements and even undermined them. (For instance, the recrudescence of slave labor in the decades leading up to the U.S. Civil War.) The Second International radicals thus sought to return to the original potential of bourgeois society in its first moment of crisis, circa 1848. As Karl Kraus put it, in a way that registered deeply with Walter Benjamin and Adorno, “Origin is the goal.”\footnote{Cited by Benjamin in “On the Concept of History,” Selected Writings vol. 4 1938–40 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2003), 395.} Even though the crisis of capital or bourgeois society grew, the question was whether the crisis \textit{advanced}. The Second International radicals recognized that while the crisis of capital, in Marx’s sense, grows, the crisis must be made to advance, as history does not progress automatically. It was in this sense that there was, potentially, a return of the 1848 moment in the development of Marxism itself, which was the attempt to make the growing crisis — what Luxemburg and Lenin called “imperialism,” and what Lenin termed capitalism’s “highest stage” — a historical advance.

The paradox of such development and transformation of Marxism itself through the return to the past moment of potential and resultant “crisis” was expressed well by Karl Korsch, who wrote, in his 1923 essay on “Marxism and Philosophy,”
[The] transformation and development of Marxist theory has been effected under the peculiar ideological guise of a return to the pure teaching of original or true Marxism. Yet it is easy to understand both the reasons for this guise and the real character of the process which is concealed by it. What theoreticians like Rosa Luxemburg in Germany and Lenin in Russia have done, and are doing, in the field of Marxist theory is to liberate it from the inhibiting traditions of [Social Democracy]. They thereby answer the practical needs of the new revolutionary stage of proletarian class struggle, for these traditions weighed “like a nightmare” on the brain of the working masses whose objectively revolutionary socioeconomic position no longer corresponded to these [earlier] evolutionary doctrines. The apparent revival of original Marxist theory in the Third International is simply a result of the fact that in a new revolutionary period not only the workers’ movement itself, but the theoretical conceptions of communists which express it, must assume an explicitly revolutionary form. This is why large sections of the Marxist system, which seemed virtually forgotten in the final decades of the nineteenth century, have now come to life again.48

So, what were these “revolutionary” aspects of Marxism that were recovered in the course of the “crisis of Marxism” (Korsch’s phrase), and how did Lenin help recover them?

**Lenin and the “end” of politics**

First, it is necessary to consider alternative interpretations of Lenin’s perspective as well as that of Marxism more generally, for instance that of Marx and Engels themselves, that might bear upon what Adorno might have assumed regarding Lenin’s politics.

For instance, A.J. Polan, in his 1984 book *Lenin and the End of Politics*, directly addresses both Lenin’s *The State and Revolution* and its influence on Adorno’s and other Frankfurt School Critical Theorists’ work (and those subsequently influenced by Critical Theory such as *Telos* journal editor Paul Piccone). What Polan means by the “end of politics” was Marxism’s supposed attempt to eliminate the deceptive illusion of politics from society. Polan thinks that, despite apparent sophistication, Adorno, as a Marxist (and as a follower of Lenin), was also subject to this fundamental mistake. The mistake consists, despite Adorno’s injunction of a necessary dialectic of “immanent” and “transcendental” critique in his 1949 essay “Cultural criticism and society,” in Marxism’s, including Adorno’s work, ultimately “transcendental critique” of society, with disastrous consequences, not only for politics but also merely for the proper understanding of society. Polan’s argument is not merely against Lenin but against Marxism as a whole, all the way from Marx to Adorno.
But Lenin comes in for specific criticism, as he was able to effect practical politics in ways Marx and Engels were not. For Polan, it was Lenin’s utter unfamiliarity with the actual political norms liberal democratic society that led to the neglect of vital issues of political mediation, both in theory and in practice. In Polan’s view, it was precisely in the problems of Lenin’s conception of emancipation, in his most socially liberatory vision as expressed in *The State and Revolution*, that allowed for the possibility of the worst crimes of the subsequent trajectory of the Russian Revolution and its greater international effects in Stalinism. But, against Polan, it is important to grasp what was abandoned from Lenin’s perspective by his supposed followers as well as what his critics were blind to in Lenin’s view of politics.

Dick Howard, in *The Specter of Democracy*, traced the development of Marx’s own conception of politics: from his work’s initial phase among the “Young Hegelians” in the 1840s; up through the *Communist Manifesto*, writings on France and Germany in the aftermath of the revolutions of 1848; as well as in *Capital*; to his late writings such as the 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Howard poses the question of what it would mean to substitute “democracy” for “communism” in Marx and Engels’s *Manifesto*’s famous opening line, “A specter is haunting Europe.” Howard addresses Marx’s work’s sometimes explicit but often implicit conception of politics, specifically as a “social relation,” not reducible to economics, in the modern epoch. While Howard calls for a return to Marx, as against the subsequent “Marxism” of those politicians such as Lenin and Luxemburg who supposedly failed to properly follow Marx, Howard’s perspective
on Marx’s approach to politics as a constitutive rather than epiphenomenal “social
relation” bears upon consideration of Lenin’s politics and its own assumptions and self-
understanding.

For Howard, the peculiar task of modern democracy is to preserve a productive
instability that allows for open-ended change. “Politics” thus is potentially liberating.49
This instability, however, brings with it the threat of reaction according to what Howard
calls an “anti-political” impulse. So, modern democracy brings with it an inherent danger
of self-destruction, or collapse into an “anti-political” regime. This is what Howard
supposes to have happened in the excesses of Marxism, unfortunately facilitated by
Marx’s own occasional ambiguities on the issue.

However, for Howard, liberal approaches to capitalism comprise its own form of
“anti-politics.” Howard offers an alternative going back to the 18th century, between the
American and French Revolutions, of striking a course and effecting a synthesis between
“democratic republicanism” and “republican democracy.” In Howard’s account, Marxism
succumbed to the temptations of the “democratic” suppression of politics in the French
Revolutionary tradition of “democratic republicanism;” while liberalism inhibited the
true potential of politics in the American model of “republican democracy” and
capitalism.

But, in emphasizing the question of “democracy” along with its inherent dangers,
Howard neglects the importance of the classical liberal distinction of the politics of

49 Howard followed The Specter of Democracy with the book The Primacy of the Political: A History of
Political Thought from the Greeks to the French and American Revolutions (Columbia University Press
2010).
governmental-state authority from civil society for Marxism. For Howard, Marx himself struggled productively through the dialectic of state and civil society and thus held fast to the unfulfilled potential of the modern practice of politics, avoiding the dangers of blindness in the antinomic perspectives of either liberal capitalism or socialist democracy.

By contrast with Howard’s perspective, Lenin, following Marx, adopted a dialectical approach to the relation of capitalism and democracy and of liberalism and socialism, specifically as a function of the effect of capitalist “alienation” or what Adorno considered the “non-identity” of politics and society. 50 But this was not to bring an end to what Howard considers the productive instability of modern society, but rather fulfilling its potential beyond capitalism. This was in the form of advancing the crisis of democracy in capitalism, rather than what Howard takes Lenin’s Marxism to express, merely trying to solve the problem of capitalism “democratically,” which indeed would threaten the repression of society in what Howard calls “anti-politics.” Perhaps it was Lenin’s tragedy that he underestimated this danger, that he assumed the vitality of society and hence of politics, its irrepressibility. Unfortunately, this was not so.

Howard critiques Adorno and the other Frankfurt School Critical Theorists regarding what Howard calls their turn to “cultural theory.” Howard put this as follows:

The appeal of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory to a young leftist of the late 1960s was based on a paradox expressed in the practice of both critical theory and the leftist. . . . Critical theory, a politics of theory and an appeal to the history of theory rather than to real history, seemed to offer

50 See Chapter IV below.
an alternative that the leftist could seize. This choice was based on a paradox that the young leftist did not see. Its premise was that modern and capitalist society is impervious to external interventions that seek to change it; theory was the only legitimate practice in such a situation, and politics then became the politics of theory. That meant that in making this choice the left would necessarily cut itself off from the popular base on which political success depended. Such was the price, and paradox, of radical politics.

Frankfurt School critical theory fit perfectly into this situation. . . . But to be effective . . . such a political critical theory would have had to pay as much attention to the logic of the political as the critical philosophers [Horkheimer and Marcuse] paid in 1937 to the logic of the concept. What kind of liberation could come from philosophical self-awareness? The basis of the turn to critical theory was the instinctive rejection (or even repulsion) of the actual political system. Liberation became an end in itself, and by a short-cut that would prove costly critical theory itself came to stand for or to replace politics. *The politics of theory replaced the theory of politics*. This gesture was justified by the famous aphorism that forms the first sentence of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*: “Philosophy, which once seemed overtaken, remains alive because the moment of its realization was missed.” Today [2002], the pendulum
finally has swung so far that the politics of (critical) theory has become the aesthetics of postmodernism. The critical political project of the Frankfurt School has disappeared. Ironically, its moment too was missed. (39–40)

This meant that the specific politics of Frankfurt School Critical Theory became obscured, and easily mistaken for which it was emphatically not, a priority and self-satisfaction of theory (let alone “philosophy,” or even “thinking,” as in Heidegger\textsuperscript{51}).

This is related, however distantly, to how Lenin’s politics was subsequently mistaken for what it was not, the supposed “primacy of politics,” or the attempt to overrule or otherwise short-circuit society politically. In so doing, the relation to society, or politics (including the politics of theory, “critical” or otherwise) as a “social relation,” was lost.

The question is one of recovering the “missed” political moment of Adorno’s critical theory. This means also recovering the missed original political moment of Marxist socialism.

Adorno, working through the aftermath of the mutual social-democratic, Stalinist and fascist liquidation of politics in the failed revolutionary aftermath of 1917–19, confronted the regression of society inherent in this process. Rather than a political sin of “anti-politics,” however, Adorno found in the history of Marxism an apprehension of this disintegration, that Marxism intended to pursue socialism’s potential to salvage politics

\textsuperscript{51} It is significant that in Adorno’s final writings from 1969, the “Marginalia to theory and praxis” and “Resignation,” Adorno characterized the degradation and degeneration of the role of Critical Theory as replacing the dialectic of theory and practice with the antinomy of thinking and action. Hence, Adorno’s critique of “actionism” in the New Left, and his highly qualified defense of “thinking” in the face of this.
from regression — what Rosa Luxemburg called “barbarism.” In this respect, Adorno’s Marxism accords with Howard’s desideratum to follow Marx in preserving politics from the intrinsically related if apparently antinomic dangers of capitalism and “anti-capitalism” or what Adorno called “Romantic socialism.” Adorno found the resources for this perspective in Lenin particularly. This involved a perspective on the history of Marxism and the greater history of which it was a part.

The difficulty consists in pursuing what might be considered a treacherous course between hastily politicized and thus potentially prematurely foreclosed approaches to history and properly considering history itself as a political relation. Certainly, history is actually quite politically contentious, but the question is how history is a political issue. This means articulating the relation between different political moments, historically, including the politics of present (and hence constantly changing or fluctuating) perspectives on history. In this, changing fortunes of perspectives on Lenin come into play, namely, specifically regarding Adorno’s writings, and how they responded to different political moments between the 1930s and the 1960s (for example the change but also continuity between mobilizing Lenin against Stalinism and the limitations of anti-Stalinism, for instance of Korsch, in the 1930s, and against the New Left in the 1960s), and for potential readings of Adorno today.

52 See section 4 “Marxism and regression,” below.
53 See for example Lars T. Lih’s recent writings on Lenin, especially his book Lenin Rediscovered: “What is to be Done?” in Context (Lieden, NL: Bril, 2006), which, from a non-Marxist perspective, tries to recapture Lenin’s politics as a radical democrat.
Lenin and the political party

Lenin made a portentous but indicative remark in the first footnote to his book *What is to be Done?*, in which he stated that,

Incidentally, in the history of modern socialism [there] is a phenomenon . . . in its way very consoling, namely . . . the strife of the various trends within the socialist movement. . . . [In] the[se] disputes between Lassalleans and Eisenachers, between Guesdists and Possibilists, between Fabians and Social-Democrats, and between Narodnaya Volya adherents and Social-Democrats, . . . really [an] international battle with socialist opportunism, [will] international revolutionary Social-Democracy . . . perhaps become sufficiently strengthened to put an end to the political reaction that has long reigned in Europe?54

In other words, could working through the issue of opportunist-reformist “revisionism” within Marxism be the means for overcoming capital? This would appear to be the self-referentiality and self-centrality of Marxism taken to its fullest flower. But there was a rationale to this. The crisis of Marxism was regarded as the highest symptom of the crisis of bourgeois society, a sign of the historical ripeness for revolution. Not only did Lenin (subsequent to *What is to be Done?*) want the Mensheviks thrown out of Russian Social Democracy (Lenin agreed with the Mensheviks on excluding the so-called “economistic” tendencies of Marxism and the Jewish Bund workers’ organizations), but a seldom

remarked fact was that Luxemburg, too, wanted the reformist Revisionists thrown out of the German Social Democratic Party (whereas Kautsky waffled on the issue). Lenin and Luxemburg wanted to split the Second International from its reformists (or “opportunists”). The political conflict within Marxism was significant for society as a whole.

Lenin not only thought that splits, that is, political divisions, in the Left or the workers’ movement were possible and desirable, but also necessary. The only differences Lenin had with figures such as Luxemburg or Kautsky were over particular concrete instances in which such splits did or could or should have occurred. For instance, Luxemburg thought that the split in Russian Social Democracy in 1903 was premature and so did not concur with Lenin and the Bolsheviks on its benefits.55 And, importantly, the question was not merely over whether a political split could or should take place, but how, and, also, when. Politics was a historical phenomenon.

There is the specific question of the “party” as a form of politics. Marx and Engels had written in the Communist Manifesto that, “The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties.” So, this would appear to present a problem in the case of Lenin, who is notorious for the “party question.” But it poses a problem for the question of Marxism in general, for Marxism confronted other, opposed, political tendencies in the working class, for instance anarchism in the First International. What had changed between Marx and Engels’s time and Lenin’s?

55 See Luxemburg, “Organizational questions of the Russian Social Democracy” (1904), which responded critically to Lenin’s account of the Bolshevik-Meshevik split in One Step Forward, Two Steps Back (1904).
As Marxists, Lenin and Luxemburg considered themselves to be vying for leadership of the social democratic workers’ movement and its political party; they didn’t simply identify with either the party or the movement, both of which originated independently of them. Both the workers’ movement and the social-democratic party would have existed without Marxism. For them, the party was an instrument, as was the workers’ movement itself. In responding to Eduard Bernstein’s remark that the “movement is everything, the goal nothing,” Luxemburg went so far as to say that without the goal of socialism the workers’ movement was nothing, or perhaps even worse than nothing, in that it exacerbated the problem of capitalism, for instance giving rise to the “imperialist” form of capitalism in the late 19th century. How were the social-democratic movement and its political parties understood by Marxists? For considering this, it is necessary to note well Marx’s critique of the Gotha Programme that had founded the German SPD and Engels’s subsequent critique of the Erfurt Programme that had made Marxism the official perspective of the Social Democratic Party. They critiqued these programmes because that’s what Marxists do: critique. No matter what had been written in these programmes, it was certain to elicit critiques from Marx and Engels.

The Marxists, that is, Marx and Engels, seem to have reluctantly gone along with the formation of a permanent party of social democracy, but not without serious reservations and caveats. The endorsement of party politics was provisional and conditional. For instance, in 1917, Lenin himself threatened to quit the Bolshevik party.
Lenin thought that he could quit the party and continue to lead the revolution, that he would quit the party in order to lead the revolution.

Luxemburg’s biographer, British political scientist J.P. Nettl, traced the question of the social-democratic party to a set of problematic conceptions, all of which were challenged in practice and theory by the radical Left in the Second International, in figures such as Luxemburg and Lenin. The party could be conceived as an interest-aggregator and pressure-group on the state, advancing the interests of the working class. Or it could be conceived, as it was most overtly by its leadership, under its organizational leader August Bebel and its leading theorist Karl Kautsky, as a “state within the state,” or what Nettl termed an “inheritor party,” aiming to take power.56 Involved in the latter was a theory not only of revolution but also of socialism, both of which were problematical. Specifically troublesome was the idea of building up the working class’s own organization within capitalism so that when its final crisis came, political power would fall into the hands of the social democrats, who had organized the working class in anticipation of such an eventuality. But these were conceptions that were challenged and critiqued, not only by later radicals such as Luxemburg and Lenin, but also by Marx and Engels themselves. Marxists such as Marx and Engels and Lenin and Luxemburg were, rightly, deeply suspicious of the social-democratic party as a permanent political institution of the working class.

The problem of party-politics

To situate this discussion properly, it is important to return to the classical liberal scorn
for political parties. There was no term of political contempt greater than “party man,” or
“partisan” politics, which violated not only the value of individuals thinking for
themselves but also, perhaps more importantly, the very notion of politics in the liberal-
democratic conception, especially with regard to the distinction between the state and
civil society. Whereas the state was compulsory, civil society institutions were voluntary.
While political parties, as forms of association, could be considered civil society
organizations, the articulation of such formations with political power in the state struck
classical liberal thinkers as particularly dangerous. Hegel, for one, explicitly preferred
hereditary monarchy over democracy as a form of executive authority, precisely because
it was free of such a problem. For Hegel, civil society would remain more free under a
monarchy than under democracy, in which he thought political authority could be
distorted by private interests. The danger lay in the potential for a civil society group to
capture state power in its narrow, private interests. Moreover, in the classical liberal
tradition, the idea of the professional “politician” was severely objectionable; rather,
state-political figures rose through other civil society institutions, as entrepreneurs,
professors, priests, etc., and only reluctantly took on the duty of public office: It’s a dirty
job, but somebody has to do it.

This problem of modern politics and its forms recurred in the late 19th and early
20th centuries to thinkers such as Robert Michels, a student and associate of Max Weber,
similarly concerned with the problem of modern “bureaucracy,” who, in a landmark study, compared the German SPD to the Democratic Party in the U.S., specifically with regard to the issue of the “party machine,” with its “ward bosses,” or machine-party politics, and the resulting tendency towards what Michels called “oligarchy.” Michels had been a member of the SPD, in its radical wing, until 1907. (Michels, who also studied the Socialist Party in Italy, went on to join Italian fascism under the former Socialist Benito Mussolini, because he thought fascism was a solution to the problem of “bureaucracy,” but that’s another story.) So the problem of party-politics was a well-known issue in Lenin’s time. For Second International radical Marxists such as Luxemburg and Lenin, the workers’ social-democratic party was not to be an interest-aggregator and permanent political institution of social power like the Democratic Party in the U.S. (which ultimately became the party of the labor unions). What, then, was the function of the social-democratic party, for figures such as Lenin and Luxemburg?

Obviously, Lenin’s concerns with politics were not the same as those of liberals, who sought to prevent the ossification of political authority from stymieing the dynamism of civil society in capitalism. For Lenin’s concern was above all with revolution, that is, fundamental social transformation. But was the issue of politics thus so different in Lenin’s case? This raises the important issue of how social revolution and transformation were related to “politics,” in the modern sense. That is, whether Lenin was interested in the “end” of politics as conceived in liberalism and practiced under capitalism, or instead concerned with overcoming the obstacle to the practice of politics that capitalism had
become. How was overcoming the social problem capitalism had become a new beginning for the true practice of politics? In this sense, it is important to address how political mediation was brought into being but ultimately shaped and distorted by the modern society of capital, especially after the Industrial Revolution.

“Politics” is a modern phenomenon. Modern politics is conditioned by the crisis of capital in modern history. Traditional civilization, prior to the bourgeois, capitalist epoch, was subject to crises that could only be considered natural or divine in origin. Modern society is subject, for Marxists (as well as for liberals), rather, to human-made crisis thus potentially subject to politics. Bourgeois politics indeed responds to the permanent crisis of capitalism — in a sense, that’s all it does — but in inadequate terms, naturalizing aspects of capitalism that should be regarded as changeable, but can only be so regarded, for Marxists, as radically and consistently changeable, from a proletarian or working-class socialist perspective. Thus, modern politics has been haunted by the “specter of communism,” or socialism. As Marx put it, in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, “Every demand of the simplest bourgeois financial reform, of the most ordinary liberalism, of the most formal republicanism, of the most insipid democracy, is . . . stigmatized as ‘socialism.”’

Furthermore, the concrete meaning of socialism or communism is subject to change. For Marxists, the demand for socialism in the 19th century was itself an engine of capitalist development, historically. The story of socialism, then, is bound up with the

development of capital, and the question of whether and how its crisis was growing and advancing.

Moreover, the question of party-politics *per se* is a post-1848 phenomenon, in which modern socialism was bound up. In other words, the crisis of bourgeois society in capital after the Industrial Revolution and the failure of the “social republic” in 1848, was the crisis of bourgeois society *as liberal*. The rise of party-politics was thus a feature of the growing authoritarianism of bourgeois society, or, the failure of liberalism. As such, socialism needed to take up the problems of bourgeois society in capital that liberalism had failed to anticipate or adequately meet, or, to take up the cause of liberalism that bourgeois politics had dropped in the post-1848 world. For Marx, the problem was found most saliently in Louis Bonaparte’s popular authoritarianism against the liberals in Second Republic France, culminating in the *coup d’état* and establishment of the Second Empire. As Marx put it, the capitalists were no longer and the workers not yet able, politically, to master the bourgeois society of capital. Party-politics was thus bound up with the historical phenomenon of Bonapartism.

**Lenin and the crisis of Marxism**

The period of close collaboration between Luxemburg and Lenin around the 1905 Russian Revolution saw Luxemburg leveling a critique of the relation that had developed between the social-democratic party and the labor unions in her pamphlet on *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions*. (Also, during this time Luxemburg
wrote a defense of Lenin against the Menshevik charge of “Blanquism,” which she called “pedantic,” and thought said more of the reformist opportunism of those leveling the charge against Lenin than about its target. In her *Mass Strike* pamphlet, Luxemburg delineated specific and non-identical roles for the various elements she mentioned in her title, that is to say, general strike committees, political parties, and labor unions (not mentioned specifically were the “soviets,” or workers’ councils). In this sense, the “mass strike” was for Luxemburg a symptom of the historical development and crisis of social democracy itself. This made it a political and not merely tactical issue. That is, for Luxemburg, the mass strike was a phenomenon of how social democracy had developed its political parties and labor unions, and what new historical necessities had thus been brought into being. Luxemburg’s pamphlet was, above all, a critique of the social-democratic party, which she regarded as a historical symptom. This was prefigured in Luxemburg’s earlier pamphlet on *Reform or Revolution?*, where she addressed the question of the raison d’être of the social-democratic movement (the combination of political party and labor unions).

From this perspective of regarding the history of the workers’ movement and Marxism itself as intrinsic to the history of capitalism, then, it becomes possible to make sense of Lenin’s further articulations of politics in his later works, *The State and Revolution* and “Left-Wing” *Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, as well as in the political disputes that attended the young Soviet state that had issued from the Russian

Revolution and had endured the Civil War and stabilization of international capitalism in the aftermath of WWI. Lenin maintained a strictly minimal conception of the state, restricting it to the monopoly of authority for the exercise of force, precisely in order to avoid an all-encompassing conception of the state as the be-all and end-all of politics. Similarly, Lenin deemed “infantile” the impatience of supposed radicals with existing forms of political mediation, such as parliaments, stating unequivocally that while Marxism may have “theoretically” surpassed a liberal conception of the state, this had not yet been achieved “politically,” that is, in practice. In response to Trotsky’s recommendation that labor unions be militarized in the Soviet state, Lenin maintained that unions needed to remain independent not only of the state, but also of the Communist Party itself. The workers needed the ability, according to Lenin, of asserting their rights against the party and the state. Lenin recognized the necessity of an articulated non-identity of state, political parties, and other voluntary civil society institutions such as labor unions. This was grounded in Lenin’s perspective that capitalist social relations could not be abolished in one stroke through political revolution, that, even though the state had been “smashed,” it was reconstituted, not on the basis of a new social principle, but on the continuation of what Lenin called “bourgeois right,” long after the political overthrow and even social elimination of a separate capitalist class. “Bourgeois right” persisted precisely among the workers (and other previously subordinate members of society) and so necessarily governed their social relations, necessitating a state that could thus only “wither away.” Politics could be only slowly transformed.
Finally, there is the question of Adorno’s continued adherence to Lenin, despite what at first glance may appear to be some jarring contradictions with respect to Lenin’s own perspective and political practice. For instance, in a late essay from 1969, “Critique,” Adorno praised the U.S. Constitutional system of “divisions of powers” and “checks and balances” as essential to preserving the critical function of reason in the exercise of political authority. But this was an example for Adorno, and not necessarily to be hypostatized as such. The making common of executive and legislative authority in the “soviet” system of “workers’ councils” was understood by Lenin, as Adorno well knew, to coexist with separate civil society organizations such as political parties, labor unions and other voluntary groups, and so did not necessarily and certainly did not intentionally violate the critical role of political mediation at various levels of society.

It has been a fundamental mistake to conflate and confuse Lenin’s model of party politics for a form of state in pursuing socialism. Lenin presupposed their important non-identity. The party was meant to be one element among many mediating factors in society and politics. Moreover, Lenin’s party was meant to be one among many parties, including multiple parties of the working class, vying for its adherence, and even multiple “Marxist” parties, differing in their relation of theory and practice, or means and ends.

By contrast, there was nothing so repressive and authoritarian as the Kautskyan (or Bebelian) social-democratic “party of the whole class” (or, the “one class, one party” model of social democracy, that is, that since the capitalists are of one interest in

confronting the workers, the workers need to be unified against the capitalists). The social-democratic party, after all, waged the counterrevolution against Lenin and Luxemburg. Lenin preserved politics by splitting Marxism.

**Lenin’s politics**

A principal mistake that can be made in contemplating Lenin’s political thought and action is due to assumptions that are made about the relation of socialism to democracy. Lenin was not an “undemocratic socialist” or one who prioritized socialism as an “end” over the “means” of democracy. Lenin did not think that once a majority of workers was won to socialist revolution democracy was finished: Lenin was not an authoritarian socialist.

In Lenin’s view, socialism was meant to transcend liberalism by fulfilling it. The problem with liberalism is not its direction, supposedly different from socialism, but rather that it does not go far enough: socialism is not anti-liberal. The 20th century antinomy of socialism versus liberalism, as expressed in Isaiah Berlin’s counterposing of “positive and negative freedoms” or “freedom to [social benefits] versus freedom from [the state],” or the idea that social justice conflicts with liberty, travesties (and naturalizes) and thus degrades the actual problem, which is not a clash of timeless principles — liberalism versus democracy — but a historically specific contradiction of capitalism. To clarify this, it is necessary to return to a Marxist approach such as Lenin’s.

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The error consists of addressing a dialectical approach to politics such as Lenin’s in an undialectical and eclectic manner, as if there were a number of criteria to be checked off (anticapitalism, democracy, etc.), rather than a set of intrinsically interrelated historical problems to be worked through together. The actual dialectic of the historically interrelated developments of capitalism, democracy, and the struggle for socialism demands a dialectical approach in both practice and theory. The reason that various moments of Lenin’s thought and action can appear contradictory is due to an undialectical interpretation of Lenin, not to Lenin himself. Lenin is subject to the same interpretive problem as Marx: the question of Lenin cuts to the heart of Marxism.61

This is recognizable by way of considering Lenin's various discussions of the state, political parties, and society.62 Lenin assumed that these were not the same thing and did not assume that “socialism” meant making them into the same thing. Lenin’s readers (both followers and detractors) either praise or denounce Lenin, mistakenly, for his supposed attempts to make society into an undifferentiated totality. Not only what Lenin said, but what he did shows otherwise. Furthermore, one must take into account how Lenin avowedly sought to be true to Marx, whether one judges Lenin to have been successful in this or not. Therefore, at least in part, one must reckon with the problem of evaluating Lenin as a Marxist.

It is a fundamental error to regard Lenin as a largely unconscious political actor who was reduced to theoretically “justifying” his actions. There is the problem of the

fallacy of projecting a reader’s own inclinations or fears onto Lenin and misinterpreting him accordingly. On the contrary, one must address what Lenin said and did in terms of the coherence of his own self-understanding. For this, it is necessary to regard the historical, that is, social and political, circumstances within which Lenin not only acted but spoke. From the various available records, Lenin did not write treatises but political pamphlets, moreover with propagandistic purpose, including his most “theoretical” works such as *The State and Revolution* (1917).

What is clear is that Lenin did not advocate the partyification of the state (or statification of the party) or the statification of society — in this crucial respect, Lenin remained a “liberal.” Both of these phenomena of Stalinization post-date Lenin and need to be addressed in terms of a process beginning after Lenin's medical retirement, the dangers of which Lenin was well aware and against which he struggled, in vain, in his final years.63

The ban on factions that seems to impugn Lenin’s motives and show a supposed continuity between him and Stalin can be addressed rather straightforwardly. Lenin came in 1921 to advocate banning organized factions, not dissent, within the Russian Communist Party, precisely because of the differentiated realities of the party, the state, and society in the Soviet workers’ state of the former Russian Empire. Many careerist state functionaries had joined the party (though, according to Lenin, they deserved only to be “shot”), and the party-controlled state faced a deeply divided society, in which he thought that the party could become a plaything in the hands of other state and greater

The ban on factions was meant not only to be merely a temporary measure, but it should be noted that Lenin did not call for such ban on factions in the Communist International, which was considered a single world party divided into national sections. The ban on factions was meant to address a danger specific to the Bolsheviks being a ruling governmental party under certain conditions, and it was inextricably tied to the contemporaneous implementation of the New Economic Policy. One might interpret the ban as directed against the Left, whereas in fact it was directed against the Right, that is, directed against the power of the status quo in the former Russian Empire swamping the politics of social revolution. So, the ban on factions was a self-consciously limited and specifically local compromise to Lenin’s mind, and not at all the expression of any kind of principle. It is a serious mistake to regard it otherwise. The fact that the ban on factions helped lead to Stalinism does not make it into an “original sin” by Lenin. Revolution beyond the Soviet Union was the only way to ameliorate the problems of Bolshevik rule, as Rosa Luxemburg, for one, recognized.64 See for example a statement that Luxemburg’s close collaborator Leo Jogiches made in response to

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64 See Luxemburg, “The Russian Tragedy” (1918): The awkward position that the Bolsheviks are in today, however, is, together with most of their mistakes, a consequence of basic insolubility of the problem posed to them by the international, above all the German, proletariat. To carry out the dictatorship of the proletariat and a socialist revolution in a single country surrounded by reactionary imperialist rule and in the fury of the bloodiest world war in human history — that is squaring the circle. Any socialist party would have to fail in this task and perish — whether or not it made self-renunciation the guiding star of its policies. . . . Such is the false logic of the objective situation: any socialist party that came to power in Russia today must pursue the wrong tactics so long as it, as part of the international proletarian army, is left in the lurch by the main body of this army. The blame of the Bolsheviks’ failures is borne in the final analysis by the international proletariat and above all by the unprecedented and persistent baseness of German Social Democracy. Available online at: <http://www.marx.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/09/11.htm>.
questions about the role of the Bolsheviks in the 1917 October Revolution. In November 1917, Jogiches stated, matter-of-factly, that “we should be examining the situation in Russia from our radical Marxist point of view. . . . [Lenin, et al.] are of course good comrades and honest revolutionaries, but the specific conditions in Russia push them towards certain conclusions that we may not be able to underwrite.”

The other mistake, indicative of a fundamental misunderstanding of the relation of the struggle for proletarian socialism to democracy and the politics of the state, is to regard problems of economics and politics as similar in kind. There is no contradiction between democracy in politics and hierarchy of authority in various concrete activities, whether economic or military. The question is one of social and political leadership and responsibility. Is a factory responsible only to its own employees, or to society as a whole? Lenin was certainly not a syndicalist or “council communist,” that is, Lenin did not think that socialist politics can be adequately pursued by labor unions or workers’ councils (or more indeterminate “democratic assemblies”) alone, but this does not mean Lenin was undemocratic. The issue of democracy in economic life cannot be considered in an unmediated way without doing violence to the societal issues involved. The point of “democratizing the economy” is not to be understood properly as simply workplace

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“The wonderful events in Russia affect me like a life-giving elixir. . . . It must, it will have a redeeming effect in the whole world, it must radiate all over Europe. I am absolutely convinced that this is the beginning of a new epoch.” . . . [Luxemburg wrote to Karl Kautsky’s wife Luise:] “Are you happy about the Russians? Of course, they cannot last long in this witches’ Sabbath,” not because of their backward economy but because the Social Democracy in the West consisted of miserable cowards who would look on as the Russians bled to death. (222)
democracy. This is because socialism is not merely a problem of the organization of production, let alone merely an economic issue. Socialism is not merely democratic. Rather, democracy poses the question of society and, from a Marxist perspective, the “social question” is capitalism. Marxism recognizes the need for democracy in capitalism. Lenin addressed the possibility of overcoming the necessity of the state or, more precisely, the need for democracy. Marxism agrees with anarchism on the goal of superseding democracy, but disagrees on how to get there from here. Marxism recognizes the need for a democratic state posed by capitalism that cannot be wished away.

The society and state in question were addressed by Lenin with respect to the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” which is, importantly, not a national state. His vision was for a workers’ state at a global scale. Because the bourgeois state is a global and not a national phenomenon, neither is the Marxist vision of the “workers’ state.” Lenin did not pursue a national road to socialism. As a Marxist, he recognized that, under capitalism, “the state” — of which various national states were merely local components — was essentially the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.” This did not mean that there were no political struggles among the capitalists to which various nation states could and did become subject. Rather, the need for socialism was tied to a need for a global state as well as a truly free global civil society already expressed under capitalism.66 Only by understanding what Marx meant by the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” in liberal

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democracy can we understand what Lenin meant by the “dictatorship of the proletariat”
in a revolutionary “workers’ state.”

Lenin’s politics was liberal because it understood the necessity of politics within
the working class, which does not and cannot take place outside the domains of bourgeois
rights and politics, but which is rather inevitably and necessarily part and parcel of them.
Lenin did not advocate the unmediated politicization of society, which he found to be
regressive, whether understood in authoritarian or “libertarian” terms.

The Russian Revolution presented new problems, not with regard to socialism,
which was never achieved, but rather with regard to the revolution, which failed. Like the
Paris Commune of 1871, the revolution that opened in 1917 was abortive. Isolation in
Russia was defeating: the failure of the German Revolution 1918–19 was the defeat of
the revolution in Russia. Stalinism was the result of this defeat, and adapted itself to it.
Lenin already contended with this defeat, and distinguished his Marxism from both Right
opportunism and ultra-Leftism. The question is, what can be learned about this failure,
from Lenin’s perspective?

Because democratic discontents, the workers’ movement, and anti-capitalist and
socialist political parties, operate in a differentiated totality of bourgeois society that must
be transformed, they are subject to politicization and the problems of democratic self-

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67 The reason why the global state under capital tends toward liberal democracy at the core but tolerates
tyranny in its subordinate domains or peripheral extremities is the expediency or convenience of
opportunism; despotism in the center, by contrast, is highly politically contentious and untenable. Indeed, it
has led to world wars.

68 See Lenin, “Left-wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder (1920). Available online at:
determination that liberal bourgeois society has historically placed on the agenda. Proletarian socialism, in Lenin’s view no less than Marx’s, does not nullify these problems but seeks to allow them a fuller scope of activity. Lenin advocated not only a workers’ “state,” but also workers’ political parties and other workers’ civil society institutions such as labor unions and workers’ publications, which the struggle for socialism necessitated. This is true after the revolution even more than before because the workers’ social revolution is meant to build upon the existing society. Lenin was an avowed Marxist “communist.” As Marx put it, communism seeks a society in which the “free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”

Both “libertarian” and authoritarian tendencies in socialism tend to avoid the importance of Lenin’s Marxism on this score, because both tendencies tend to conflate society and politics. This is not only anti-liberal but illiberal and un-Marxist, whether understood hierarchically or “democratically.” Capitalism is already a “grassroots” and thus a democratic phenomenon, and not merely a baleful hierarchy of authority: its problem goes beyond democracy.

The proletarian socialist revolution, in Lenin’s view as well as Marx’s, was not meant to bring about the Millennium, but rather to clear certain obstacles to the struggle for the working class’s social and political self-determination (not exclusively as a matter of the state), which Marx and Lenin thought could lead society beyond capitalism. Moreover, this was conceived largely “negatively,” in terms of problems to be overcome.

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The revolution, in Marxist terms, does not produce an emancipated society ready-made, but only, perhaps, political forms through which emancipatory social transformation, otherwise blocked by capitalism, might be pursued and developed further. Lenin, like Marx, thought that overthrowing both the rule of capitalist private property in the means of production and the subjection of society to the vicissitudes of the market, the classic demands of proletarian socialism as it had developed after the Industrial Revolution, might allow this.

Neither Marx nor Lenin came with blueprints for an emancipated society in hand. Rather, Lenin, following Marx, advocated pursuing the forms of the struggle for socialism that had emerged historically in and through the development of the workers’ movement itself. Historical Marxism did not formulate independent schemes for emancipation, but sought the potential social-emancipatory content of emergent political phenomena in light of history. Lenin as well as Marx advocated the workers’ “right to rule,” but followed other socialists in doing so. It is necessary to address Lenin as a consistent advocate of workers’ power, and consider how he understood the meaning of this in the struggle for socialism.

Socialism in the original Marxist sense that Lenin followed does not seek to undo but rather tries to press further the gains of historically “bourgeois” liberal democracy. Liberalism is not meant to be negated but fulfilled by democracy, just as bourgeois society is not meant to be torn down but transcended in overcoming capitalism. Liberal
and democratic concerns need to answer to the historical tasks of emancipatory social transformation, not timeless political “principles.”

Lenin himself was very clear on this, even if neither most of his supposed followers nor his detractors have been. The problem is anti-Marxist interpretive bias that is blinding.

**Lenin in Horkheimer and Adorno’s conversation on Communism in 1956**

Horkheimer and Adorno’s conversation in 1956, published in English translation as *Towards a New Manifesto* (2011), took place in the aftermath of the Khrushchev speech denouncing Stalin. This event signaled a possible political opening, not in the Soviet Union so much as for the international Left. Horkheimer and Adorno noted the potential of the Communist Parties in France and Italy, paralleling Marcuse’s estimation in his 1947 “33 Theses:”

> The development [of history since Marx] has confirmed the correctness of the Leninist conception of the vanguard party as the subject of the revolution. It is true that the communist parties of today are not this subject, but it is just as true that only they can become it. . . . The political task then would consist in reconstructing revolutionary theory within the communist parties and working for the praxis appropriate to it. The task

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70 “[Horkheimer:] [S]uch a [revised, ‘strictly Leninist’ communist] manifesto could not appear in Russia, while in the United States and Germany it would be worthless. At best, it might have some success in France and Italy” (*NLR* 2010, 57); and, “[Adorno:] Any appeal to form a left-wing socialist party is not on the agenda. Such a party would either be dragged along in the wake of the Communist Party, or it would suffer the fate of the SPD or [U.K.] Labour Party” (*NLR* 2010, 61).
seems impossible today. But perhaps the relative independence from Soviet dictates, which this task demands, is present as a possibility in Western Europe’s . . . communist parties.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s conversation in 1956 was part of a greater crisis of Communism (uprising in Hungary, emergence of the post-colonial Non-Aligned Movement, split between the USSR and Communist China) that gave rise to the New Left. This was the time of the founding of *New Left Review*, to which C. Wright Mills wrote his famous “Letter to the New Left” (1960), calling for greater attention to the role of intellectuals in social-political transformation.

As Adorno put the matter, “I have always wanted to . . . develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin.” Horkheimer responded laconically, “Who would not subscribe to that?” (103). It is necessary to understand what such statements took for granted.

The emphasis on Marxism as an account of “exploitation,” rather than of social-historical *domination*, is mistaken. Marx called “capital” the domination of society by an alienated historical dynamic of value-production (M–C–M'). At stake here is the proletarianization of bourgeois society after the Industrial Revolution, or, as Lukács put it in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), how the fate of the workers becomes that of society as a whole. This went back to Marx and Engels in the 1840s: Engels had written a

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71 For instance, Lukács pointed out, in “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” part 1, “The Phenomenon of Reification,” quoting Marx in volume III of *Capital*, that, “the conditions of direct exploitation [of the labourer], and those of realising surplus-value, are not identical. They diverge not only in place and time, but also logically.”
precursor to the *Communist Manifesto*, a “Credo” (1847), in which he pointed out that the proletariat, the working class after the Industrial Revolution, was unlike any other exploited group in history, in both its social being and consciousness. The danger was that the working class would mistake their post-Industrial Revolution condition for that of pre-industrial bourgeois society, with its *ethos* of work. As the Abbé Sieyès had put it, in his 1789 revolutionary pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?*, while the Church’s First Estate with its property of communion with Divinity “prays,” and the aristocratic Second Estate with its property of honor in noble chivalry “fights,” the commoner Third Estate “works,” with no property other than that of labor. Bourgeois society was the result of the revolt of the Third Estate. But the separate classes of increasing numbers of workers and ever fewer capitalists were the products of the division of bourgeois society in the Industrial Revolution, over the value of the property of labor, between wages and capital. This was, according to Marx, the “crisis” of bourgeois society in capital, recurrent since the 1840s.

At issue is the “bourgeois ideology” of the “fetish character of the commodity,” or, how the working class misrecognized the reasons for its condition, blaming this on exploitation by the capitalists rather than the historical undermining of the social value of labor. As Marx explained in *Capital*, the workers exchanged, not the products of their work as with the labor of artisans, but rather their *time*, the accumulated value of which is *capital*, the means of production that was the private property of the capitalists. But for Marx the capitalists were the “character-masks of capital,” agents of the greater social
imperative to produce and accumulate value, where the source of that value in the
exchange of labor-time was being undermined and destroyed. As Horkheimer stated it in
“The Authoritarian State” (1940), the Industrial Revolution made “not work but the
workers superfluous.” The question was, how had history changed since the earlier
moment of bourgeois society (Adam Smith’s time of “manufacture”) with respect to
labor and value?

Adorno’s affirmation of Lenin on subjectivity was driven by his account of the
deepening problems of capitalism in the 20th century, in which the historical
development of the workers’ movement was bound up. Adorno did not think that the
workers were no longer exploited. See Adorno’s 1942 essay “Reflections on Class
Theory” and his 1968 speech “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?,” which he
published in the U.S. under the title “Is Marx Obsolete?” In “Reflections on Class
Theory,” Adorno pointed out that Marx and Engels’s assertion that the entire history of
civilization was one of “class struggles” was actually a critique of history as a whole; that
the dialectic of history in capital was one of unfreedom; and that only the complete
dehumanization of labor was potentially its opposite, the liberation from work. “Late
Capitalism or Industrial Society?” pointed out that the workers were not paid a share of
the economic value of their labor, which Marx had recognized in post-Industrial
Revolution capitalism was infinitesimal, but rather their wages were a cut of the profits of
capital, granted to them for political reasons, to prevent revolution. The ramifications of
this process were those addressed by the split in the socialist workers’ movement — in Marxism itself — that Lenin represented.

The crisis of Marxism was grasped by the Frankfurt School in its formative moment of the 1920s. In “The Little Man and the Philosophy of Freedom” (in *Dämmerung*, 1926–31) Horkheimer explained how the “present lack of freedom does not apply equally to all. An element of freedom exists when the product is consonant with the interest of the producer. All those who work, and even those who don’t, have a share in the creation of contemporary reality.” This followed Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, which prominently quoted Marx and Engels from *The Holy Family* (1845):

> The property-owning class and the class of the proletariat represent the same human self-alienation. But the former feels at home in this self-alienation and feels itself confirmed by it; it recognizes alienation as its own instrument and in it possesses the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels itself destroyed by this alienation and sees in it its own impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence.

And the necessary corrective was not the feeling of this oppression, but the theoretical and practical consciousness of the historical potential for the transformation of “bourgeois social relations,” at a global scale: “Workers of the world, unite!” This could only take place through the growth and greater accumulated historical self-awareness of the workers’ movement for socialism. But the growth of the workers’ movement had
resulted in the crisis of socialism, its division into revolutionary Communism and reformist Social Democracy in WWI and the revolutions that followed (in Russia, Germany, Hungary and Italy). Reformist Social Democracy had succumbed to the “reification” of bourgeois ideology in seeking to preserve the workers’ interests, and had become the counterrevolutionary bulwark of continued capitalism in the post-WWI world. There was a civil war in Marxism. The question was the revolutionary necessity and possibility of Communism that Lenin expressed in the October 1917 Revolution that was meant to be the beginning of global revolution. Similarly, for the Frankfurt School, the Stalinism that developed in the wake of failed world revolution, was, contrary to Lenin, the reification of “Marxism” itself, now become barbarized bourgeois ideology, the affirmation of work, rather than its dialectical Aufhebung (negation and transcendence through fulfillment and completion).

To put it in Lenin’s terms, from What is to be Done? (1902), there are two “dialectically” interrelated — potentially contradictory — levels of consciousness, the workers’ “trade union” consciousness, which remains within the horizon of capitalism, and their “class consciousness,” which reveals the world-historical potential beyond capitalism. The latter, the “Hegelian” critical self-recognition of the workers’ class struggle, was the substance of Marxism: the critique of communism as the “real movement of history.” As Marx put it in his celebrated 1843 letter to Ruge, “Communism is a dogmatic abstraction . . . infected by its opposite, private property.” And, in his 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Marx stated unequivocally that,
Communism is the position as the negation of the negation, and is hence the *actual* phase necessary for the next stage of historical development in the process of human emancipation and rehabilitation. *Communism* is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism as such is not the goal of human development, the form of human society.

For Marx, communism demanded an “immanent critique” according to its “dialectical” contradictions, heightened to adequate historical self-awareness.

The issue is the potential abolition of wage-labor by the wage-laborers, the overcoming of the social principle of work by the workers. Marx’s “Hegelian” question was, how had history made this possible, in theory and practice?

While Horkheimer and Adorno’s historical moment was not the same as Marx’s or Lenin’s, this does not mean that they abandoned Marxism, but rather that Marxism, in its degeneration, had abandoned them. The experience of Communism in the 1930s was the purge of intellectuals. So the question was the potential continued critical role of theory: how to follow Lenin? In “Imaginative Excesses” (orphaned from *Minima Moralia* 1944–47 — the same time as the writing of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), Adorno argued that the workers “no longer mistrust intellectuals because they betray the revolution, but because they might want it, and thereby reveal how great is their own need of intellectuals.”
Adorno and Horkheimer are thus potentially helpful for recovering the true spirit of Marxism. Their work expresses what has become obscure or esoteric about Marxism. This invites a blaming of their work as culpable, instead of recognizing the unfolding of history they described that had made Marxism potentially irrelevant, a “message in a bottle” they hoped could still yet be received.
4. Marxism and regression

“Dictatorship of the proletariat” as expression of social-political regression

In 1852, Marx wrote to Josef Wedemeyer that his most important contribution was to establish the necessity of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”72 What did Marx mean?

The failure of the revolutions of 1848 left unfulfilled the tasks of the “social republic.” For Marx, the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was the necessary form of the social republic in the age of “Bonapartism.” When Marx and Engels later wrote, of the Paris Commune, that it fulfilled the desiderata of the bourgeois republic, while instantiating what they meant by the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” they importantly assumed certain significant characteristics of the historical epoch of the post-1848 world.

The 1871 Paris Commune was a repetition of the revolutionary crisis of 1848. In it, according to Marx, Proudhonian socialism was both fulfilled and negated, superseded in its return. For Marx, 1848 was the essential turning point in social politics, in which the proletarianization of bourgeois society rendered both liberalism and democracy impossible yet still necessary. Marx’s vision of communism was the simultaneous achievement and transcendence of the promise of liberal democracy bourgeois society

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72 Marx to Josef Wedemeyer, March 5, 1852: “Now as for myself, I do not claim to have discovered either the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me, bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this struggle between the classes, as had bourgeois economists their economic anatomy. My own contribution was 1. to show that the existence of classes is merely bound up with certain historical phases in the development of production; 2. that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; 3. that this dictatorship itself constitutes no more than a transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society.” On January 1, 1852, Weydemeyer had published an article in The New York Turn-Zeitung titled “Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” [Available on-line at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/letters/52_03_05.htm>]
had held since its emergence in the 17th century. 1848 was the first proletarian revolution. That is, it was the first revolution after the Industrial Revolution.

In 1847, Engels had written several texts that served as early drafts of the 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party* he co-authored with Marx. In these, the central importance of the change of the Industrial Revolution, the unique character of the industrial working class in history, was established. Engels’s and Marx’s insights into their historical moment were conditioned by the crisis of the “hungry 1840s,” the first global commercial crisis of the industrial epoch.

Marx developed his approach to the question of socialism through his critiques of Proudhon, first in the unpublished Paris Manuscripts of 1844, which had as its centerpiece the critique of Proudhon’s famous 1840 pamphlet *What is Property?*, then in the 1847 book *The Poverty of Philosophy*, a critique of Proudhon’s 1847 *The Philosophy of Misery* [*Poverty*]. Proudhon was the preeminent socialist of this time. The workers’ movement for socialism was a phenomenon of the crisis of the 1840s, building upon but distinct from earlier forms of socialism, for instance the “utopian” socialism of Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, characteristic of the earlier 19th century. Modern socialism as a political ideal was a development of the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution, emerging to articulation with Babeuf’s Conspiracy of Equals.

However, Babeuvian socialism was transcended in the development of bourgeois society. Benjamin Constant, building upon both Kant and Adam Smith’s interpretations and elaborations of Rousseau, argued for the supersession of political democracy by
freedom in civil society. This was a judgment of history expressed contemporaneously by Hegel. But it was precisely this civil society of the bourgeois epoch that came into crisis by the 1840s, not only through the economic collapse of the 1840s, but also through the crisis of democracy expressed by the rise of the workers’ movement for socialism.

All of this was the essential background for Marx’s thought and politics. Marx appeared to, so to speak, contradict himself, between the insights into the “one-sided” character of political communism expressed in the 1844 Manuscripts and the endorsement of communism in 1848’s Manifesto. In the Manifesto, Marx and Engels rehearsed the themes of Marx’s critique of communism in the 1844 Manuscripts, but in inverted form, turning the “bourgeois” accusations against communism around, towards characterizing post-Industrial Revolution capitalism as self-contradictory. This followed from Marx’s articulation of the necessity of the immanent critique of the categories of bourgeois society in crisis, in the 1844 Manuscripts. In the Manifesto, Marx and Engels accused capitalism of doing precisely what supposedly indicted communism, the destruction of the family, religion, and even private property itself. This followed from Marx’s characterization, in the 1844 Manuscripts, of how the worker had gone from being the most precious to the most wretched of commodities in bourgeois society after the Industrial Revolution.

In many crucial respects, Marx and Engels’s Manifesto of the Communist Party, commissioned by the Communist League, was the enframing with a Hegelian philosophy of history of the already constituted demands of the socialist workers’ movement,
demands which Marx had critiqued in the 1844 *Manuscripts*. Indeed, the “Hegelian” self-consciousness of the socialist workers’ movement was the aim of Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto* — and in all of their subsequent works. How was such a “dialectic” justified?

Marx’s conception of the historical “necessity” of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was the recognition of the “teleology” of the crisis of post-Industrial Revolution bourgeois society, as the potential freedom to transcend this social-historical crisis, immanently. The difficulty of Marx’s critical appropriation of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is its evident perversity, by which Marx aimed to raise its self-consciousness, freeing it from an otherwise fatal one-sided character, in which it failed to point beyond the crisis of bourgeois society. Marx recognized the potential reproduction, but in barbarized form, of bourgeois society in communism. Rather, Marx sought to realize the fulfillment of the promise of freedom in bourgeois society through communism, aware of its own symptomatic character, as a moment in the transition beyond the crisis of bourgeois society in its industrial proletarianization. For Marx, the demand to go beyond bourgeois society was also the demand to fulfill it.

The problem, already evident in Marx’s time, was that the self-contradiction, between bourgeois society fulfilling and negating its emancipatory potential, widened. In Marx’s view, this yawning contradiction was the source of bourgeois society’s regression. As bourgeois society fell into greater crisis, it undermined its own potential. What was a productive, “positive” dialectic for earlier bourgeois thinkers such as Adam Smith, Kant and Hegel, became, in Marx’s time, what Adorno would later call a
“negative dialectic,” that is, a need to go beyond the dialectic of bourgeois society
become self-destructive. The issue, for Marx, was how to enlist the pressure of this
regressive dynamic of history towards emancipation.

The workers’ movement for socialism was, for Marx, the essential background for
the devolution of bourgeois society into authoritarianism in the 19th century. Marx
categorized the Paris Commune as the inversion of Louis Bonaparte’s Second Empire.
Marx characterized Napoleon III’s social-political support as simultaneously “petit
bourgeois” and “lumpen-proletarian.” By this Marx meant that proletarian socialism and
authoritarianism were two sides of the same coin. Hence, for Marx, the “dictatorship of
the proletariat” was the dialectical reversal, but only potentially emancipatory inversion,
of the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie” in the post-Industrial Revolution epoch. Only the
wage-laborers could abolish wage-labor, and only in and through the social-political
conditions that the crisis of bourgeois society in capital itself had generated. Marx’s
conception of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was dialectical, regarding regression.

Adorno, Marx, and Marxism: bourgeois society and capital (pace Moishe Postone)
This approach to Adorno prioritizes his place in the history of Marxism, especially as
Adorno himself understood this. This means recovering why Adorno considered himself
to be a “Marxist” at all, how Adorno understood the question of Marxism in his moment.

Moishe Postone’s work on the interpretation of Marx’s critical theory of capital
provides important background and fundamental orientation on the approach to the
philosophy of history and the issue of critical reflexivity in Marxism, and on the relation and connection between these (see Chapter IV). However, because Postone considers Adorno to be lacking such adequate historical awareness, this approach will necessarily differ from Postone’s. Several passages from Postone’s book on Marx, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (1993), provide occasion for articulating these differences on Adorno.

There is Postone’s treatment of Adorno in particular, specifically of Adorno’s last completed book, *Negative Dialectics* (1966). Postone concludes his chapter on “Abstract labor” with the following discussion of Adorno on identity, non-identity and contradiction:

This [Postone’s own] analysis of the alienated social forms as at once formal and substantive yet contradictory differs from . . . any pessimistic notion of the totality as a “one-dimensional” structure of domination (one without intrinsic contradiction)[, which] is not fully adequate to the Marxian analysis. Rooted in the double character of commodity-determined labor, the alienated social totality is not, as Adorno for example would have it, the identity that incorporates the socially non-identical in itself so as to make the whole a noncontradictory unity, leading to the universalization of domination [see Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*]. To establish that the totality is intrinsically contradictory is to show that it remains an essentially contradictory identity of identity and
nonidentity, and has not become a unitary identity that has totally
assimilated the nonidentical. (185)

For Postone, Adorno misunderstood the contradiction of capital in Marx’s sense, between
labor-time and capital, as one between labor and private property: Adorno, along with the
rest of the Frankfurt School as “traditional Marxists,” could only pessimistically
misapprehend 20th century developments, beyond property and the market, as the non-
emancipatory overcoming of the contradiction of capital, in favor of a “one-dimensional
society” (Marcuse) of non-contradiction, as in Friedrich Pollock’s 1941 thesis on “state
capitalism.” But Postone neglects that Adorno insisted, contra Pollock (Wiggershaus,
282), that modern society remained a contradictory totality, as Adorno put it, “under the
law of labor” (1945: quoted in Claussen, Adorno: One Last Genius, 48), however
differently than in the 19th century. Specifically, Postone regards the 20th century as
giving rise to a “post-bourgeois” form of capital that rendered 19th century consciousness
obsolete, whereas Adorno, following Marx, found an immanent, dialectical contradiction
of bourgeois society and capital, in both the 19th and 20th centuries.

Adorno critical concept of “identity thinking” is, first of all, not a critique of
terminological identity, of nominative reduction, or any other such metaphysical ontology
of substance over thought, but rather his way of posing the fundamental contradiction and
dialectic of (social) being and consciousness, that there is a fundamental non-identity —
and alienation — of conditions of social being (in capitalism) and our concepts for
thinking about it, a productive antagonism and “dialectic” that is inevitably “negative,” in
Hegel’s sense of thinking as the “labor of the negative,” but also, in the sense of the negation of consciousness by social conditions of being, its mocking recalcitrance as well as its making consciousness secondary at best or at worst irrelevant.

In *Negative Dialectics*, in a section titled “On the dialectics of identity,” Adorno wrote that,

> By immersing itself in what initially opposes it, the concept, and becoming aware of its immanently antinomical character, thought abandons itself to the idea of something which would be beyond the contradiction. The opposition in thinking to what is heterogenous to it is reproduced in thought itself as its immanent contradiction. Reciprocal critique of the general and the particular, the identifying acts which judge whether the concept does justice to what it is dealing with, and whether the particular also fulfills its own concept, are the medium of the thinking of the non-identity of the particular and concept. And not of thinking alone. If humanity is to rid itself of the compulsion, which really is imposed on it in the form of identification, it must at the same time achieve identity with its concept. All relevant categories play a part in this. The exchange-principle, the reduction of human labor to an abstract general concept of average labor-time, is [originally and fundamentally] related to the identification-principle. It has its social model in exchange, and it would not be without the latter, through which non-identical
particular essences and achievements become commensurable, identical. The spread of the principle constrains the entire world to the identical, to totality. If the principle meanwhile was abstractly negated; if it was proclaimed as an ideal that, for the greater honor of the irreducibly qualitative, things should no longer go according to like for like, this would create an excuse for regressing into age-old injustice. For the exchange of equivalents was based since time immemorial exactly on this, that something unequal was exchanged in its name, that the surplus-value of labor was appropriated. If one simply annulled the measurement-category of comparability, then what would step into the place of the rationality, which was indeed ideological yet also inherent as a promise in the exchange-principle, is immediate expropriation, violence, nowadays: the naked privilege of monopolies and cliques. What the critique of the exchange-principle as the identifying one of thought wishes, is that the ideal of free and fair exchange, until today a mere pretext, would be realized. This alone would transcend the exchange. Once [Marxian] critical theory has demystified this latter as something which proceeds by equivalents and yet not by equivalents, then the critique of the inequality in the equality aims towards equality, amidst all skepticism against the rancor in the bourgeois egalitarian ideal, which tolerates nothing qualitatively divergent. If no human being was deprived of their share of
their living labor, then rational identity would be achieved, and society would be beyond the identifying thought. This comes close enough to Hegel. The demarcation line from him is scarcely drawn by particular distinctions; rather by the intent: whether consciousness, theoretically and in practical consequence, would like to maintain identity as the ultimate, as the absolute and reinforce it, or else become aware of it as the universal apparatus of compulsion, which it ultimately requires in order to escape from the universal compulsion, just as freedom can only really come to be through the civilizing compulsion, not as a retour à la nature [back to nature]. The totality is to be opposed by convicting it of the non-identity with itself, which it denies according to its own concept.73

The complex thought presented here is that modern society is in contradiction with itself according to its own avowed principles, and that this contradiction can be overcome only by realizing those principles, not by regressing below them. Specifically, Adorno’s distinction between Hegel and Marx is that of pre-Industrial Revolution bourgeois society (Hegel) from post-Industrial Revolution “capital” (Marx). It was already the case in the 19th century that post-Industrial Revolution society lived in contradiction with itself through the “18th century ideas” of bourgeois society (Grundrisse 1973, 83). The contradiction of modern society, according to Adorno, is that between its being simultaneously and contradictorily bourgeois society and not bourgeois society, that is, capital; that we live in the world of capital but think, rather, that we live in the world of capital.

pre-capital, bourgeois society, before the new contradiction of the Industrial Revolution. However, the ideological forms of discontents in modern society remain those of bourgeois society contradicted by capital: we still aspire to the ideals of bourgeois society. For Adorno, overcoming the contradiction of capital will thus be through the forms of its misrecognition as (still being) bourgeois society. Realizing “just exchange,” or the bourgeois-ideological “promise” of social exchange, would mean overcoming capital and overcoming bourgeois society: the Aufhebung of bourgeois society and of capital at one and the same time. The immanent transcendence of the social principle of the exchange of labor would be its realization as well as its abolition. This was the heart of Adorno’s understanding of Marx’s immanently dialectical critique of bourgeois political economy, after the Industrial Revolution and the “proletarianization” of modern society, which Adorno found to inform all aspects of subjectivity: the “principle of identity” in contradiction with itself. The modern society of capital presents itself as bourgeois society. This became, after the Industrial Revolution, both ideological deception and promise pointing beyond it. “The law of labor” for Adorno is thus both true and false, as both ideology and promise: the reason that its discontents still proceed according to it. Hence, for Adorno, Marxism was the “Hegelian” self-consciousness of the necessary misrecognition of the proletariat in its “class struggle” for “socialism,” within and through the modern, bourgeois society of capital, pointing beyond it (see Chapter V).
Postone addresses specifically Adorno’s approach on this score in a footnote for the section “Critique and contradiction” in the chapter on “The limits of traditional Marxism and the pessimistic turn in [Frankfurt School] Critical Theory.” There, Postone states that “Marx’s immanent critique of capitalism . . . does not consist simply in opposing the reality of that society to its ideals” (88–89, emphasis added). Perhaps not “simply” so, but such an opposition of ideals to reality is in fact involved in Marx’s approach to the critique of political economy. The issue is what this means. As Adorno put it in Negative Dialectics (as articulated above), the status of such bourgeois ideals is as both “ideology” and “promise.” This is because reality is not known directly as it “is,” but rather mediated through ideological appearances, “necessary forms of appearance” that are also forms of “misrecognition,” and “necessarily” so. As Hegel put it, “the essence must appear,” meaning, “essence” must assume a form of “appearance:” appearances are essential. With what necessity is reality misrecognized? To put this in terms of the dialectical German Idealist philosophy of Kant and Hegel that was Marx’s

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74 For instance, see Marx’s 1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, section on “Estranged Labour,” which states that,

We have proceeded from the premises of political economy. We have accepted its language and its laws. We presupposed private property, the separation of labor, capital and land, and of wages, profit of capital and rent of land — likewise division of labor, competition, the concept of exchange value, etc. On the basis of political economy itself, in its own words, we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production; that the necessary result of competition is the accumulation of capital in a few hands, and thus the restoration of monopoly in a more terrible form; and that finally the distinction between capitalist and land rentier, like that between the tiller of the soil and the factory worker, disappears and that the whole of society must fall apart into the two classes — property owners and propertyless workers. (Tucker 1978, 70.)

In other words, the development and crisis of bourgeois society in capital historically contradicted the promise of bourgeois political economy and its “ideals,” to value labor, eliminate monopoly, etc.
background, what “is” is only what it is, in its “actuality,” in its potential possibility; what “is” is informed by what it “ought” to be, what it could and should be. The necessity of such appearance is one of freedom: transformation. The question is, how is freedom actualized? How does transformation take place? Specifically, transformation takes place in and through forms of misrecognition, through the way social reality must appear, necessarily misrecognized. For Marx, and for Adorno following him, this meant the necessary forms of misrecognition or “ideology” of the workers’ movement for socialism that emerged with the Industrial Revolution but pointed beyond it, as “promise.” For Marx, however, this new ideology was also a continuation of the older, liberal ideology: it was bourgeois ideology in extremis, and not only in “contradiction.” See, for example, Marx’s critique of Proudhon’s anarchist socialism, as “petit bourgeois;” in the 1840s, in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The Poverty of Philosophy of 1847, foundational for Marx’s subsequent elaborate critique of “bourgeois” political economy in Capital. Marx took the preceding liberal political economy to be inherited as ideology by the workers’ movement for socialism. As Adorno put it, in “Reflections on class theory” (1942), “the new is the old in distress.” At best, socialism inherited the concerns and desiderata of liberalism. At worst, it was illiberal and regressive. As Marx put it, in his September 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge,

[T]he internal obstacles seem almost greater than external difficulties. For even though the question “where from?” presents no problems, the question “where to?” is a rich source of confusion. Not only has universal
anarchy broken out among the reformers, but also every individual must admit to himself that he has no precise idea about what ought to happen. . . . [Thus,] communism is a dogmatic abstraction, and by communism I do not refer to some imagined, possible communism, but to communism as it actually exists in the teachings of Cabet, Dezamy, and Weitling, etc. This communism is itself only a particular manifestation of the humanistic principle and is infected by its opposite, private property. The abolition of private property is therefore by no means identical with communism and communism has seen other socialist theories, such as those of Fourier and Proudhon, rising up in opposition to it, not fortuitously but necessarily, because it is only a particular, one-sided realization of the principle of socialism.75

Marx thus grasped the antinomy of socialism and liberalism, which he sought to render “dialectical:” the contradiction of the property of labor with itself in communism, specifically through the necessary forms of misrecognition in the workers’ movement for socialism.

Hence, when Postone addresses Adorno in particular in the following footnote, there is an overly hasty and unjustified elision of the difference between Adorno and, for instance, Habermas, on the status of “liberal bourgeois” ideals:

The idea that an immanent critique reveals the gap between the ideals and the reality of modern capitalist society is presented, for example, by

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Theodor Adorno in “On the Logic of the Social Sciences,” The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby (London, 1976), p. 115. In general, Critical Theory and its sympathetic commentators strongly emphasize the immanent character of Marx’s social critique; however, they understand the nature of that immanent critique as being one that judges the reality of capitalist society on the basis of its liberal bourgeois ideals. See, for example, Steven Seidman, Introduction, in Seidman, ed., Jurgen Habermas on Society and Politics (Boston, 1989), pp. 4–5. The latter understanding reveals the extent to which Critical Theory remains bound to some basic presuppositions of the traditional critique from the standpoint of “labor.” (89n8)

But Adorno recognized “labor” precisely as “bourgeois ideology.” See, for instance, Adorno and Horkheimer’s 1956 “Discussion on theory and praxis” (in Horkheimer, Gesammelte Schriften Vol. 19 Nachträge, Verzeichnisse und Register, S. Fischer 1996, 32–72; trans. Rodney Livingstone, Towards a New Manifesto?, Verso 2011, excerpts published in New Left Review 65, September–October 2010, 32–61), in which Horkheimer and Adorno pointed out that the necessity of labor in post-Industrial Revolution bourgeois society was not physical but rather “ideological” (NLR 65, 33–36). How was this ideology of labor to be opposed and overcome, according to Horkheimer and Adorno? Immanently:
[Adorno:] [The reification of labor] has a positive and a negative side. The positive side lies in the teleology that work potentially makes work superfluous; the negative side is that we succumb to the mechanism of reification, in the course of which we forget the best thing of all. That turns a part of the process into an absolute. But it is not an aberration, since without it the whole process wouldn’t function. (35)

In other words, labor became potentially superfluous in post-Industrial Revolution capitalism, but for capitalism to continue, the bourgeois social principle of labor must be “reified,” ideologically hypostatized, as the “thing in itself” (33), the true purpose of human activity. It was in this sense of the critique of labor that Adorno remained Marxist, in specifically Marx’s sense (cf. Todd Cronan’s review of the Horkheimer-Adorno discussion, “You are all proletarians,” Radical Philosophy 174, July–August 2012, 31–33, where Cronan argues that, by de-prioritizing class distinctions and the exploitation of the workers, Horkheimer and Adorno abandoned Marxism). Postone’s point on Marx about bourgeois ideals and reality is thus fulfilled by Adorno: the “standpoint of labor” is dialectical.

There is, beyond the question of the workers’ movement for socialism of the early 19th century, which Marx critiqued beginning in the 1840s, the question of Marxism itself, specifically, as an ideology of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Postone addresses this concisely in his treatment of Karl Korsch’s essay, seminal for Adorno (see Chapter IV), “Marxism and philosophy” (1923), in the first part of his book, “A critique
of traditional Marxism.” In the chapter “Presuppositions of traditional Marxism,” section on “The critique of society from the standpoint of labor,” addressing the relation of consciousness and history, Postone offers the following critique of Korsch:

[H]aving established the possibility of such a “critical political economy” in the forms of appearance of the social relations themselves (instead of attributing it to muddled thinking), one could then try to elucidate the historical conditions for the emergence of such a form of thought. (Although this proposed procedure would entail using Marx’s analysis to examine Marxism, it has only the most external similarities with Karl Korsch’s notion of the application of “Marx’s principle of dialectical materialism . . . to the whole history of Marxism” [Korsch 1970, 56]. Korsch does not make use of the epistemological dimension of Capital, in which forms of thought are related to the forms of the social relations of capitalism. Neither is he concerned primarily with the problem of the substantive character of the social critique — the critique of production and distribution, as opposed to that of distribution alone. Korsch’s procedure remains more extrinsic: he seeks to establish a correlation between revolutionary periods and a more holistic and radical social critique, and between nonrevolutionary periods and a fragmented, more academic and passive social critique [Korsch 1970, 56–67].) An important element of such an attempt most likely would involve an analysis of the
For Adorno, however, the history of Marxism leading up to his time was far more important than what Postone credits here. For Adorno, historical Marxism was more than what Postone calls “traditional Marxism,” the ideology of “working-class movements in their struggle to constitute themselves, achieve recognition, and effect social and political changes . . . to assert the dignity of labor and contribute to the realization of a society in which labor’s essential importance is recognized in material and moral terms” (70). For Postone, “Marxism” was the misnomer for a phenomenon in which Marx’s “critical social theory” was only superficially “appropriated,” including by such “critical” (but still, for Postone, entirely “traditional”) “Marxists” as Korsch, in a period of history in which the proletariat and capital were still being “constituted” and not yet potentially overcome (Postone 1978). The question, however, is the dialectic of the reconstitution of capital and its potential transcendence; the issue is how this dialectic had advanced.

By contrast with Postone, Adorno considered Marxism to be a profoundly revolutionary and consequential political movement that Marx himself had initiated, which, however, for Adorno, had come to grief in 1919, with the defeat of the global uprising of 1917–19 at the end of World War I in which avowedly Marxist political organizations took part, the series of revolutions in Russia, Germany, Hungary and Italy.
Adorno considered his work — indeed, his entire life experience — to be a function of the aftermath of this failure of Marxism that conditioned subsequent history. As Adorno put it, in a short essay from the early 1960s, “Those Twenties,”

Already in the twenties, as a consequence of the events of [the failure of the German Revolution in] 1919, the decision had fallen against that political potential that, had things gone otherwise, with great probability would have influenced developments in Russia and prevented Stalinism.

(43).

According to Adorno, “The heroic age . . . was actually around 1910” (41), that is, during the pre-WWI era of the Second International in which Marxism had flourished. In his inaugural lecture of 1932, “The idea of natural history,” Adorno had concluded, simply, “I submit myself . . . [to the] materialist dialectic” (124). (More extensively: “[I]t is not a question of completing one theory by another, but of the immanent interpretation of [Marxist] theory. I submit myself, so to speak, to the authority of the materialist dialectic.”) The question is what Adorno meant by this, and how his awareness of history was informed by it: Was Adorno adequately critically reflexive in the historical self-consciousness of his theory? If so, how? (Concerning history as such, see Chapter V.)

For Postone, Adorno was inevitably a “traditional Marxist” subject to the fatal prematurity of his time for overcoming capitalism, whose possibility arrived only in the late 1960s. For Postone, this meant Adorno’s inevitable misapprehension, typical of Marxists in the early–mid 20th century, of the contradiction of capital, which Marx had
forecast in the 19th century but came to potential actuality only in the late 20th century. For Postone, Marx’s critical theory could be interpreted properly only in Postone’s own time, not in Adorno’s, and certainly not in the period preceding Adorno that provided Adorno’s fundamental orientation in the history of Marxism.

An approach to Adorno such as Postone’s would thus rule out a priori any potential insights Adorno might offer — or render them as, at best, mere aperçus. Hence, Postone’s anachronistic critique of Adorno must be set aside, in order to clear the way to investigate the continued meaning of Adorno’s work, specifically regarding Adorno’s Marxism. What must be assumed is that Adorno can be read as a Marxist, and meaningfully and not debilitatingly so. The resonance and purchase of Adorno’s Marxism are not anachronistic but due to our remaining in Adorno’s — and Marx’s — historical moment, the modern, post-Industrial Revolution bourgeois society of capital, whose horizons have not been transcended but only obscured: Adorno’s Marxism can thus help to recognize such horizons of possibility.
Part 2. Theory-practice

Chapter III. Adorno’s problematic reception and legacy

Introduction

Two very different yet related frames for the reception of Adorno’s work after his death are posed in this chapter: Jürgen Habermas, as representative of the so-called “second generation” of the Frankfurt School, in his 1969 eulogy for Adorno that critiques Adorno’s work; and Frankfurt School and Hegel scholar Gillian Rose’s “Hegelian” critique of Marxism as a whole, including Adorno’s Marxism and its roots in Lukács and Marx.

For Habermas, the challenge of the 1960s New Left rendered Adorno’s legacy both urgent and problematical. In many ways, Habermas cast Adorno’s discontented students as the responsibility of Adorno’s own work, specifically of its limitations. No historical argument for the obsolescence of Adorno’s work is made by Habermas, however; rather, an ambiguous course is charted in which Adorno’s work is critiqued for both failing to transcend the limitations of historical Marxism and failing to follow Marx adequately. Habermas’s eulogy describes a missed opportunity in Adorno’s work. This is related to Habermas’s sympathy for Adorno’s position regarding his late disagreement with Herbert Marcuse on the New Left. Habermas, like Adorno, was emphatically critical of the New Left. The question is what the potential basis was for critiquing the New Left from a Marxist perspective.
It becomes necessary, then, to investigate further the nature of the differences regarding Marxism between Marcuse and Adorno. Such contestation over the legacy of Marxism and over Marx in particular, helps establish the central concerns of Adorno’s writings in his final year, what he called the “epilegomena” to his last completed monograph *Negative Dialectics*, writings that originated in his debate in correspondence with Marcuse. Specifically, what Adorno called the “non-identity” of “theory and practice,” and what Adorno considered to be Marx’s opposition to the recrudescence of “Romantic socialism” in the elision of this non-identity in the 20th century, including of New Left, is brought out as the “red thread” coursing through Adorno’s work from the 1930s through the ’60s.

Gillian Rose’s “Hegelian” critique of Adorno’s work, as part of her greater critique of Marxism, is shown to neglect this central concern of Adorno’s work, what it had in common with the crucial precursors to Frankfurt School Critical Theory, Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch’s work from the early 1920s that remained seminal for Adorno, and what Adorno followed Korsch and Lukács in recovering from Marx, a specific and peculiar theory of “alienation” or non-identity of social being and consciousness that distinguishes Marxism from Hegelianism.

Demonstrating the neglected aspects of Adorno, Lukács and Marx in Rose’s treatment of the issue is the occasion for connecting Adorno on theory and practice with Lukács and Korsch’s own recovery of the “Hegelian” dimension of Marxism. This leads to Chapter IV’s exposition of Adorno’s work’s situation in the history of Marxism, both
with respect to the aftermath of the failed revolution of 1917–19 and the politics of Korsch and Lukács’s recovery of Marxism that was indeed motivated by such attempted revolutionary politics.

1. Adorno in 1969

A certain legend of the 1960s New Left has it that Adorno had been hostile to student radicalism. This placed Adorno’s legacy for progressive politics in doubt for at least two decades after 1969. Adorno had defended his junior colleague Jürgen Habermas’s warning of “left fascism” among 1960s student radicals, and challenged Herbert Marcuse’s support for student radicalism, questioning its emancipatory character. Horkheimer commented about the ’60s radicalism, “But is it really so desirable, this revolution?” Infamously, Adorno called the police to clear demonstrators from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in 1969. Students protested that “Adorno as an institution is dead.” Some months later, while hiking on vacation, Adorno suffered a heart attack and died. Adorno’s subsequent reception was thus conditioned by the experience of the New Left.

Eulogizing Adorno in 1969, Habermas raised two issues for the post-1960s reception of Adorno's work: Adorno’s work was both inspiring and frustrating for the critique of modern society; and Adorno had left little to suggest directions to take beyond a “meager reprise of Marxism.” The controversy over Adorno since the 1960s has been
over the nature and character of Adorno’s Marxism, formed in the 1920s–30s, which has not been given a proper account.

**Habermas: “calling into his master’s open grave”**

Soon after Adorno died in 1969, Habermas wrote a eulogy to him titled “The Primal History of Subjectivity — Self-Affirmation Gone Wild.” The title itself says quite a bit about Habermas’s ambivalent thoughts and feelings about Adorno. In this eulogy, Habermas expressed his profound ambivalence towards both Adorno as a person and the legacy of his work. Habermas took this opportunity to offer a critique, one which had been clearly long in the making. This makes Habermas’s eulogy a document articulating and expressing profound frustration with Adorno, and indicative of the problems in the reception of Adorno’s work in the 1960s. Adorno’s death seemed to allow certain things to be put more directly. It was as if Adorno had been an enigmatic character taken away too soon, before revealing the mystery, but, also, it was as if his character had represented something of the block with which one was always struggling but failing to overcome. In this sense, it is unclear whether Adorno’s passing was regretted or welcomed by Habermas and others among Adorno’s students.

A central motif of Habermas’s eulogy to Adorno is the moment of Hegelian dialectic in which “what is disappearing [is regarded] as essential.” (This thought-figure is more well known by Hegel’s famous phrase that “the Owl of Minerva flies at dusk.”) For Habermas, Adorno was exemplary of “the bourgeois subject, apprehended in the
process of disappearance,” “which is still for itself, but no longer in itself.” Habermas introduced Adorno’s character in order to explain the possibility for his work, in terms of an openness that Habermas found to be productive of real insights — but also consisting of texts beset by “enchanting analyses:”

In psychological terms . . . the incomparably brilliant geniality of Adorno has constantly evinced as well something of the awkward and fragile position of a subject still for itself but no longer in itself. Adorno never accepted the alternatives of remaining childlike or growing up; he wanted neither to put up with infantilism nor to pay the cost of a rigid defense against regression. . . . In him there remained vivid a stratum of earlier experiences and attitudes. This sounding board reacted hyper-sensitively to a resistant reality, revealing the harsh, cutting, wounding dimensions of reality itself. This primary complex was [. . .] consistently in free communication with his thought — opened, as it were, to his intellect.

In this characterization, Habermas rehearsed the idea that Adorno, as a last “Mandarin” intellectual, was grounded in his critical theory in an earlier historical epoch, namely the liberal capitalism of the 19th century. However, what this fails to consider is that the formative experiences for Adorno’s thought were those that defined 20th century history: 20th century capitalism is the central object for Adorno’s thought, and one in which he himself is implicated, and not at all out of his element, as Habermas’s characterization would suppose.
Habermas concluded Adorno’s his eulogy with a salute to Adorno, that his “aid [had been] indispensable” to understanding the “situation” of the present. But this “situating” of the present is understood as a matter of a history that is decidedly past. However, Habermas was also anxious to defend Adorno against the criticisms of some of his more “impatient” students in 1969, for, as Habermas put it, “they do not realize all that they are incapable of knowing in the present state of affairs.” This was the basis for Habermas’s defense the “rational core” of Adorno’s critical theory, against the confusions that Habermas found to arise from his writings.

“All that they are incapable of knowing” — for Habermas, Adorno’s critical theory had failed to render the social world of 1969 critically intelligible (to his students). At best, Adorno’s work brought to manifest and acute presentation what had yet to be understood; at worst, it contributed to false understanding — hence, Habermas’s ambivalence. Habermas was anxious to preserve something of Adorno’s critical theory, in this way defending it against itself. Reading Habermas’s eulogy today, precisely what the rational core of Adorno’s critical theory might have been to Habermas proves to be elusive. It was something that had proved elusive to Habermas as well, for he did not himself offer the answers that Adorno’s work had supposedly failed to provide, at least not at that time. The equivocal position in which Habermas left himself in this moment of Adorno’s passing was one of sympathizing with the criticism leveled against Adorno’s work, that,
the theory that apprehended the totality of society as untrue would actually be a theory of the impossibility of theory. The material content of the theory of society would then also be relatively meager, a reprise of the Marxist doctrine.

For Habermas, Marx’s critical theory of capitalism might have been adequate to its 19th century moment, but was now outdated. Even so, Habermas apparently knew that such an apprehension was not quite right — the summary phrase “would then” holds Habermas’s own authorial voice at a certain remove from such a conclusion.

The “meager . . . reprise of the Marxist doctrine” — this was Habermas’s way of addressing the theoretical tradition from which Adorno’s thought originated, and which was experiencing a certain (if ambiguous) renaissance during the final years of Adorno’s life: the “New” Left. For the late 1960s saw the beginning of the last important “return to Marx,” which regained the saliency of Adorno’s critical theory, even if this reconsideration of Marxist critical theory in its greater measure had to wait until Adorno had already passed from the stage. Habermas acknowledged this problematic moment of 1968–69 when Adorno’s critical theory was confronted by the demand from his students not only for social theory but, more emphatically, for social transformation and emancipation. Cautioning against the conclusion that Adorno’s critical theory had resigned from the task of social emancipation, Habermas wrote that,

[A]fter Adorno’s opening talk to the sixteenth German Congress of Sociology in 1968 on “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society” [translated
and published in English that same year in the journal *Diogenes* under the title “Is Marx Obsolete?”], one could not maintain this [criticism of Adorno] in the same fashion.

But Habermas added immediately that “however, the point [of this criticism] remains.” Habermas cited contemporary criticism of Adorno (and of Adorno’s collaborator on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer), for instance by Adorno’s student Albrecht Wellmer, of the danger that arises when the dialectic of enlightenment is misunderstood as a generalization[, ] in the field of [the] philosophy of history[, ] of the critique of political economy[, ] and tacitly substituted for it. Then . . . the critique of the instrumental spirit can serve as the key to a critique of ideology, to a depth hermeneutics[,] that starts from arbitrary objectifications of the damaged life[reference to the subtitle of Adorno’s famous book Minima Moralia, “notes from damaged life”], that is self-sufficient and no longer in need of an empirical development of social theory.

Such a misunderstanding was one into which, however, Habermas maintained, “Adorno never let himself fall.”

On the other hand, Habermas did object to the fact that it “was [seemingly] sufficient for [Adorno] to bring in a little too precipitously the analyses handed down from Marx,” adding that “Adorno was never bothered by political economy.” Habermas
resolved that “the decodifying of the objective spirit by ideology critique, to which
Adorno had turned all his energy in such a remarkable way, can be easily confused with a
theory of late-capitalist society,” a theory to whose lack Habermas attributed the
problems and the aporetic, confounding character of social discontents and rebellion in
1969 — “all that they are incapable of knowing.”

Habermas seemed to have laid at least some of the blame for the inadequate
nature of such self-understanding and expressions of social discontents in the 1960s at the
door of the preceding generation of Critical Theorists, and his eulogy expressed
frustration with Adorno’s work as exemplary of this failure. Habermas expressed
sympathy with the gesture of Adorno’s student who had “called into his master’s open
ground, [that] ‘He practiced an irresistible critique of the bourgeois individual, and yet he
was himself caught within its ruins’.” While stating that this statement was “quite true,”
Habermas observed soberly that the demand that Adorno “strip away the last layer of his
‘radicalized bourgeois character’ ” had been an impossible one. Still, the student’s
accusation struck home, for Habermas ventured “that praxis miscarries may not be
attributed to the historical moment alone” — precisely what Habermas thought Adorno
had attributed to his own social-historical situation as a critical theorist. Instead,
Habermas considered “the imperfection of [Adorno’s Marxist] theory,” and wished to
cautions against any possible direct appropriation of Adorno’s work: Habermas qualified
Adorno’s critical legacy with this certain reservation: against (what could only be a
“meager reprise” of Marxism.
However, the nature and character of Habermas’s reservations about Adorno, as a person and as a critical theorist, the fascinating, “enchanted” puzzle of Adorno’s thought that Habermas sought deliberately to place to one side in moving forward from him, might have resulted from Habermas’s — and others’ — misapprehension of the foundation of Adorno’s critical theory itself. For thought-figures seeking to elaborate Marx’s critique of social modernity — capitalism — permeate literally every phrase in Adorno’s corpus. To grasp this requires more direct attention to the formative moment of Adorno’s thought than has been hitherto attempted.1

The “return to Marx” that occurred in the two periods of the 1920s-30s and the 1960s–70s can be characterized well by referring to certain seminal statements, such as found in writings by Korsch from the early 1920s, and by C. Wright Mills, Martin Nicolaus, and Leszek Kolakowski from the 1960s. Bringing these into communication with Adorno’s later work, including key passages from Adorno’s last completed major work, *Negative Dialectic*, published in 1966, and works from 1968-69, most especially his speech on “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society,” his essays “Subject and Object” and “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (which Adorno regarded as extensions of his *Negative Dialectic* project), and one of his last published articles, on “Resignation,” illuminates the social-political desiderata of Adorno’s Marxism through his very last writings. The last letters between Adorno and Marcuse, in which they debated the merits of the 1960s Left, help situate Adorno’s Marxism and the state of its legacy today to the

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1 See Chapter IV, below.
extent that we might recognize the history for problems of any possible “Left” for our present in Adorno’s critical prognosis on the 1960s.

The “New” Left of the 1960s (1): motivations for a “return to Marx”

The prominent American sociologist C. Wright Mills can be credited with promulgating the term “New Left” in a sustained manner from an early date. In 1960, Mills wrote a letter to the newly founded British journal *New Left Review.* (which took its name from its combination of the previous publications *Universities and Left Review* and *The New Reasoner* — *New Left Review*’s first editor, Stuart Hall, wrote in his “Introduction to New Left Review” that “the political discussion which those two journals have begun, and the contacts they have made are the basis of the New Left,” thus coining the term for which the 1960s Left would be known.) In his “Letter” Mills delivered a series of suggestions and caveats to the younger generation of self-styled Leftists. Mills’s “Letter” is an excellent text for grappling with issues for the emergence of the 1960s New Left. Mills accounted for the emergence of a “New” Left in the crisis of liberalism, at the levels both of ideology and practical politics, manifesting in a combination of what he termed the “liberal rhetoric and conservative default” that amounted to political “irresponsibility.” Furthermore, directing his comments specifically to his British readers and their Labor Party, Mills took issue with the attenuated politics of contemporary socialism/social democracy, afflicted by, as he termed it, a “labor metaphysic.” The politics of this “labor metaphysic,” while apparently privileging the working class as “the historic agency of
change,” in actuality treated the workers merely as “The Necessary Lever,” really the object and not, as was claimed, the subject of socialist politics. — So what would be the adequate “subject” of emancipatory politics? For Mills, it was precisely discontented consciousness, in the ideological forms it takes. For this reason, Mills’s greatest ire was reserved for “end of ideology” Cold War liberalism (and social democracy). Mills castigated “end of ideology” writers like apostate Marxist (and Adorno’s former research assistant) Daniel Bell for their “attack on Marxism . . . in the approved style” of Cold War liberalism. Mills complained that,

these people have become aware of the uselessness of Vulgar Marxism, but not yet aware of the uselessness of the liberal rhetoric. . . . [Hence] “answers” to vital and pivotal issues are merely assumed. Thus political bias masquerades as epistemological excellence, and there are no orienting theories.²

Citing Marx repeatedly throughout his “Letter,” Mills encouraged his readers to the return to Marx, if not to “Vulgar Marxism.” Most remarkably, Mills inveighed in favor of the most radical politics of 20th century Marxism:

Forget Victorian Marxism [i.e., the late 19th century Marxism of social democracy], except whenever you need it; and read Lenin again (be careful) — Rosa Luxemburg, too.

Thus the thrust of Mills’s “Letter” is its emphasis on the importance of ideology for Leftist politics. What was vital for Mills was the question of social imagination.

² Mills, New Left Review 1/5 (1960), 23.
Mills’s acute term for this attention to ideology was “utopianism.” “Utopianism” was necessitated precisely, in Mills’s view, by the erosion of the prior established agencies for social and political change, the voluntary civic associations that had characterized liberalism, and the radicalized workers movement that had characterized socialism. With the evacuation of such mediating institutions of social agency, the Left was left waiting for a return to a past historical formation, a turning of the historical tide back to past forms of social struggle and agency. Mills remained agnostic on the forms that future social struggles might take: he was not “writing off” the workers. In the meantime, however, Mills suggested attention to the forms of discontent that had manifested in the post-WWII period, which he found among “intellectuals.” It was in this spirit that Mills encouraged reconsideration of prior generations of radicalized intellectuals, such as the Marxists Luxemburg and Lenin, against the quiescent “labor metaphysic” of the late “vulgar Marxism” in Western Social Democracy and Soviet-inspired Communism that had become uncritical, and hence implicated in political “irresponsibility.”

The Left is tasked with discovering the basis for its own discontents. Usually, this has taken the form of imputing interests to classes, but in the 20th century this became an evasion and abdication of critical consciousness, and Marxism became an affirmative ideology for society based on and social existence justified through “labor.”

Among the thinkers who tried to break out of this quandary of self-understanding for critical consciousness that beset “orthodox” Marxism in the 20th century, among the younger radicalized intelligentsia that Mills had seen in motion throughout the world by
1960 — on both sides of the “irresponsible” Cold War divide — one was the dissident Polish Marxist Leszek Kolakowski. Kolakowski and other dissident (and not yet *apostate*) Marxists in Eastern Europe were those who, as the former member of the Communist Party of Great Britain E. P. Thompson put it, “were present at every moment in [the] political consciousness” of Western Leftists, especially after the crisis of international Communism in 1956 that had come with the Khrushchev “revelations” of Stalin’s crimes and with the suppression of the Hungarian revolt (in which Marxist radicals of the preceding generation like Lukács had also participated).

Kolakowski’s essay “The Concept of the Left” (1957) emphasized the productive role of ideology for the Left, stating that

> The concept of the Left remains unclear to this day. . . . Society cannot be divided into a Right and a Left. . . . The Left must define itself on the level of ideas . . . the Left must be defined in intellectual and not class terms. This presupposes that intellectual life is not and cannot be an exact replica of class interests. . . . The Left . . . takes an attitude of permanent revisionism toward reality . . . the Left strives to base its prospects on the experience and evolutionary tendencies of history [rather than] capitulation toward the situation of the moment. For this reason the Left can have a political ideology. . . . The Left is always to the left in certain respects with relation to some political movements. . . the Left is the fermenting factor in even the most hardened mass of the historical present.
Against the naturalization of “class interests” that confounded emancipatory politics for advanced, 20th century capitalism, Kolakowski maintained that it was not society that was divided into Right and Left but ideology. Kolakowski recognized the Left as the critical element in progressive politics at the level of consciousness, and as such destined to remain always a spirited “minority.”

Kolakowski recognized the non-identity of social being and consciousness, of practice and theory, through his concept of “utopia,” which he described as a necessary “tool” of the Left.

By utopia I mean a state of social consciousness, a mental counterpart to the social movement striving for radical change in the world — a counterpart itself inadequate to these changes and merely reflecting them in idealized and obscure form. . . . Utopia is therefore a mysterious consciousness of an actual historical tendency. . . . [Hence] the Left cannot renounce utopia; it cannot give up goals that are, for the time being, unattainable, but which impart meaning to social changes.

Utopian consciousness, as a “tool,” is not a subject, but it might be an agency, however an indirect one; indeed, “as a “tool,” it would mediate the subjectivity and objectivity of critical consciousness and social practice. As Kolakowski put it, “revolution is a compromise between utopia and history.” However, Kolakowski recognized the importance that critical consciousness of emancipatory potential antedate social-transformative practice,
A revolutionary movement cannot be born simultaneously with the act of revolution, for without a revolutionary movement to precede it a revolution would never come about. . . . The desire for revolution cannot be born only when the situation is ripe, because among the conditions for this ripeness are the revolutionary demands made of an unripe reality. Hence the necessity of a critical consciousness that cannot account for itself in terms of the expression of the present simply and directly, but only in terms of the present’s non-identity — its contradiction — with itself. For Kolakowski, this is expressed precisely in the contradiction between consciousness and “reality” that takes the form of “utopia,” for consciousness can be nothing other than a constitutive part of the reality that produces the conception of “utopia.”

Such recovery of the essentially critical, intellectually provocative role of the Left was motivated precisely by the attempt to see beyond the “present,” and conditioned by Kolakowski’s recognition that Soviet Communism had long since become implicated and responsible for the status quo. The reconsideration of Marx that could be motivated through the emphasis on ideology, on the critical aspects of his work for provoking consciousness of unfulfilled emancipatory potential, was marked by the writings of dissident French Communist Louis Althusser and others such as André Gorz and Martin Nicolaus, those who had been termed (for instance by the president of the U.S. Students for a Democratic Society Carl Oglesby) “neo-Marxists.” Modern Marxism, to remain
critical, was tasked with pursuing recognition of its constitutive conditions, the conditions of possibility for critical social consciousness.

Nicolaus’s 1968 essay on “The Unknown Marx” (1968) sought to recover neglected aspects of Marx’s thought on the basis of the *Grundrisse*, a collection of unpublished writings from Marx’s notebooks that Nicolaus acknowledges had garnered little substantial attention, and hitherto only by writers such as Gorz and Marcuse, “among a growing body of intellectuals, in the amorphous New Left.” Nicolaus arrayed Marx’s mature writings such as *Capital*, using the *Grundrisse* to inform his approach, against interpretations derived primarily from Marx’s more influential early writings such as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, and concluded that “the most important Marxist political manifesto remains to be written.” Reading Marx’s *Grundrisse*, Nicolaus sought to recover a perspective for revolutionary transformation precisely of “advanced” capitalism. Opposing the conclusions of the book *Monopoly Capital* by fellow New Leftists Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, Nicolaus concluded that all of the obstacles to revolution, such as those which Baran and Sweezy cite, namely monopoly, conquest of the world market, advanced technology, and a working class more prosperous than in the past, are only the preconditions which make revolution possible. Nicolaus pointed out pithily that Baran and Sweezy’s “conclusion” that revolution in advanced capitalism was impossible was actually the premise of their work. This was an abdication of the necessary work for a critical theory and politics of advanced capitalism,
because an abdication of self-reflexivity in critical consciousness, the task of critical self-recognition, and hence the reduction of consciousness to positivistic analysis divorced from any necessary connection to possible emancipatory social-political agency.

Among Marx’s writings, Nicolaus recognized only the “Critique of the Gotha Programme” (1875) as indicating a developed political direction from Marx’s mature works:

Apart from the brief *Critique of the Gotha Programme* there exists no programmatic political statement which is based squarely on the theory of surplus value, and which incorporates Marx’s theory of capitalist breakdown as it appears in the *Grundrisse*.

Nicolaus recognized that in the “Critique of the Gotha Programme” Marx objected to re-assimilating socialist politics back into the mere interests of the workers as such. The German Social Democrats whose program Marx took to task were bewildered by his critique. The importance of Marx’s “Critique” was recovered in the context of the crisis of Social Democracy during WWI and mostly as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution and the concomitant radicalization of Marxism, which motivated a reevaluation of the critical relation between Marx’s work and subsequent Marxist politics, a reconsideration that Luxemburg had commenced earlier. For example, Korsch had written an important introduction to the republication of Marx’s “Critique” in 1922, who called it “of all Karl Marx’s shorter works, the most complete, lucid and forceful expression of the bases and consequences of his economic and social theory.” At the time of its writing, however, the
depth of Marx’s “Critique” was not recognized by the “Marxists.” August Bebel, one of the principal leaders of German Social Democracy, remarked of it only that “One can see that it was no easy thing to reach agreement with the two old men [Marx and Engels] in London.”

The “New” Left of the 1960s (2): the politics and intellectual pitfalls of post-Marxism

Examples of the similar kinds of obscuring of the social-emancipatory content of Marxist critical theory, and the blind alleys in which contemporary Marxists had found themselves can be drawn from writings of the late 1960s by Adorno’s long-time colleague and friend Marcuse, such as his lecture on “The End of Utopia” (1967) and his interview in New Left Review on “The Question of Revolution” (1967). “The End of Utopia” begins with the following broadside against Marx:

I believe that even Marx was still too tied to the notion of a continuum of progress, that even his idea of socialism may not yet represent, or no longer represent, the determinate negation of capitalism it was supposed to. That is, today the notion of the end of utopia implies the necessity of at least discussing a new definition of socialism. The discussion would be based on the question whether decisive elements of the Marxian concept of socialism do not belong to a now obsolete stage in the development of the forces of production. This obsolescence is expressed most clearly, in
my opinion, in the distinction between the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity according to which the realm of freedom can be conceived of and can exist only beyond the realm of necessity. This division implies that the realm of necessity remains so in the sense of a realm of alienated labor, which means, as Marx says, that the only thing that can happen within it is for labor to be organized as rationally as possible and reduced as much as possible. But it remains labor in and of the realm of necessity and thereby unfree. I believe that one of the new possibilities, which gives an indication of the qualitative difference between the free and the unfree society, is that of letting the realm of freedom appear within the realm of necessity — in labor and not only beyond labor.

Thus Marcuse’s articulation expresses precisely the kind of “labor metaphysic” about which Mills had warned, the political incoherence that manifested with the attenuation of historical agencies of social change like the socialist working class movement — and the dearth of political imagination that Nicolaus marked, what stood in need of commensuration with Marx’s mature insights into the implications of the surplus-value dynamic of capitalism found in the *Grundrisse*. Concomitantly, in “The Question of Revolution,” Marcuse stated that “the conception of freedom by which revolutionaries and revolutions were inspired is suppressed in the developed industrialized countries with their rising standard of living.” Marcuse’s late writings thus belied the kind of conflation Kolakowski had critiqued, the inadequate conception of the Left that derived principally

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from the status of empirical social groups (e.g., classes) rather than from the very ideological dynamics of social consciousness. — Marcuse manifested precisely the failure of social imagination decried by Mills.

For example, Marcuse made much of the brute oppression and (supposed) stark life-and-death struggle of the people of Vietnam and others in the Third World as a salutary factor for emancipatory politics:

the revolutionary concept of freedom coincides with the necessity to defend naked existence: in Vietnam as much as in the slums and ghettos of the rich countries.

By characterizing the military campaigns of the North Vietnamese Communist regime and the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam in terms of a defense of naked existence, Marcuse evacuates politics, with the result of eliminating any potential basis for a critique of these struggles, and crudely instrumentalizing the horror of their realities. Similarly, Adorno’s student Oskar Negt had characterized the war in Vietnam as “the abstract presence of the Third World in the metropolis.”

The German New Leftist Rudi Dutschke, in his 1968 essay on “Historical Conditions for the International Fight for Emancipation,” wrote of the war in Vietnam as “an intellectual productive force in the process of the development of an awareness of the antinomies of the present-day world.” Dutschke went so far as to say that it was “through lectures, discussions, films, and demonstrations” that “Vietnam became a living issue for us,” thereby blurring contemplative imagery and brute realities. Adorno questioned the

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3 Quoted in Dutschke 1968, Oglesby 1969, 245.
direct connection between the anti-imperialist politics of the Vietnamese Communists and the discontents of the students. In his 1969 essay on “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (included as the last selection, one of the two “Dialectical Epilegomena” to Critical Models: Catchwords, the last collection of essays he edited for publication) Adorno laconically remarked that “it would be difficult to argue that Vietnam is robbing anyone of sleep, especially since any opponent of colonial wars knows that the Vietcong for their part practice Chinese methods of torture,” repeating language he had used in one of his last letters to Marcuse questioning Marcuse’s less than critical support for late-'60s student radicalism — and for the Vietnamese Communists.

In his letters to Marcuse, Adorno defended the record of the re-founded, post-WWII Frankfurt Institute for Social Research for its continuity with its formative politics of the 1920s-30s that had sustained the coherence of its work in the years of American emigration from the 1930s through the early ’50s. Adorno pointed out that the differences of the Institute in the ’60s from the ’30s were attributable, on the one hand, to the character of the official funding they received that demanded a specific focus on empirical sociological studies, but also, on the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, to the fact that whereas “in New York . . . we were able to draw together a large number of more or less mature intellectuals, most of whom had worked together for quite some time; here we had to train up all the affiliates ourselves.” Nevertheless, Adorno demanded that Marcuse recognize how the re-founded Institute in Frankfurt allowed for the continuation of Adorno’s own work: “Not to mention my books.” Taking Marcuse to
task on the issue of support for the student movement/New Left, Adorno sums up their differences as follows:

> You think that praxis — in its emphatic sense — is not blocked today; I think differently. I would have to deny everything that I think and know about the objective tendency if I wanted to believe that the student protest movement in Germany had even the tiniest prospect of effecting a social intervention. [131]

Adorno had argued the reasons for such an estimation of political possibilities in his last major monograph, *Negative Dialectics* (1966). There, Adorno argued for critical theory in the context of attenuated conditions for emancipatory social-political transformative practice — as Mills had argued in his 1960 “Letter to the New Left.” Adorno’s work needs to be disenchanted and resituated in its specific critique of the crisis of the Left that had begun at least as early the period of the Stalinist degeneration of the Russian Revolution. Adorno tried to steer the hard road between the Stalinophobia of the late Horkheimer and the abdication of criticism of Third World-ist Stalinism by Marcuse.

While Adorno had indeed supported the earlier configuration of student protest in 1968, in tandem with workers’ organizations, against the proposed “emergency laws” *[Notstandgesetze]* in the Federal Republic of Germany, by 1969, as Adorno pointed out, the student movement was in crisis and sought provocations to sustain its existence. Directly addressing the infamous incident in which he called the police to clear the Institute of demonstrators, Adorno responded to Marcuse:
You write that my letter gave no indication of the reasons for the students’ hostility towards the Institute. There were no such reasons until the occupation. This took place once they had calculated that we were under compulsion to call the police. Given the slackening interest of the students in the protest movement, it was the only means to achieve some sort of solidarity. [The radical student leader Hans-Jürgen] Krahl [one of Adorno’s doctoral students] calculated that quite correctly. You would not have been able to act any differently in our position; the case cited by you, “if there is a real threat of physical injury to persons, and of the destruction of material and facilities serving the educational function of the university” was exactly applicable here. What you call their hostility towards the Institute stems simply from the fact that we reacted in accordance with the provocation. [130-31]

Next to the empirical stakes of the social-political struggles of the 1920s-30s, the global crisis of the Great Depression and the rise of fascism, the Spanish Civil War, the turbulence of the politics of the Popular Front, the Purges in the Soviet Union, and the resumption of world war, the social-political stakes and direction of the radicalism of the “New” Left of the 1960s were quite unclear, apart from some traditional Leftist positions to be taken such as defense of democratic rights and civil liberties, and opposition to war (especially to [neo-] colonial adventures). The Cold War was a highly distorting framework through which any social and political discontents had to pass, both in the
United States and in West Germany. Adorno and Marcuse contrasted the conditions in
the U.S. and the B.R.D. by reference to the struggle against anti-black racism in the U.S.,
which lent the radicalism there a more serious — and grave — character. By
comparison, it was easy to regard the student radicalism in Germany as being more
infantile in character. Nevertheless, the point would have been to discern the actual
ground for the discontents that were manifesting. The categories offered by the prime
activists of the German movement like Dutschke had to strike Adorno as evidence among
the student radicals of the severe regression in critical consciousness the greater society
had exhibited.

In a letter to Adorno, Marcuse tried to maintain that activists like Daniel Cohn-
Bendit, who had publicly castigated Marcuse at a lecture for his work for the Office of
Strategic Services (predecessor in the U.S. government to the CIA) during WWII, were
isolated and minor figures in the movement of student radicals. But Adorno had
perceived something more significant in the kind of “political” action advocated by
Cohn-Bendit and Dutschke, especially in its self-conception, an idealistic “intransigence”
that was grounded more in ethical posturing than in authentic self-recognition. As Cohn
Bendit put it, in his 1968 book on Obsolete Communism: A Left-Wing Alternative, a
retrospective account of the May 1968 events in France in which Cohn-Bendit had
participated, “Make the revolution here and now.” Cohn-Bendit spurned the idea of
revolutionary organization precisely because his conception was for an unceasing
“revolution” in everyday life that had more to do with rejecting the “deadly love-making
on the [cinema] screen” [266] than with actual politics. On the other hand, this is how Dutschke put it:

The underprivileged in the whole world constitute the historical mass base of liberation movements. In them alone lies the subversive-explosive character of the international revolution. [244]

Dutschke cited favorably the Maoist conception of the politics of “Third World” liberation, arguing that the actual movement in struggle, the “mass character and the permanence of the revolutionary process” had transfigured and qualified the character of the otherwise clearly Stalinist (or worse) politics that led these movements. So the heroism of the Vietnamese against the U.S. — or of the students’ actions in “the streets” against the police — placed to one side the serious political problems of any attempts at radical social transformation in Vietnam — and Germany, France, and the U.S., etc. On both counts, in the guise of the anarchistic Cohn-Bendit or the New-Leftist Marxist Dutschke, Adorno had good grounds to interrogate the claims to actual social “radicalism” of the student activists. Even Marcuse acknowledged, in one of his 1969 letters to Adorno, a fatal mixture, “Rational and irrational, indeed counter-revolutionary demands are inextricably combined.”

Such a combination should not, in itself, have disqualified the student radicalism of the 1960s, but for the lack of critical self-awareness the activists manifested to Adorno. The critique and opposition Adorno had to the ’60s radicalism was not due to the
juxtaposition of the orthodoxy of the 1930s against the movements of the 1960s that were thus found wanting. As Adorno put it in his “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (1969), Praxis is a source of power for theory but cannot be prescribed by it. It appears in theory, merely, and indeed necessarily, as a blind spot, as an obsession with what is being criticized . . . this admixture of delusion, however, warns of the excesses in which it incessantly grows. [278]

Critical consciousness is tasked with reflexively recognizing this delusionary aspect of any possible emancipatory social-political practice.

**Adorno in 1969: the non-identity of subject and object**

For Adorno, the subject mediates the object, or, in sociological terms, the individual mediates society, and, in philosophical terms, consciousness mediated reality. This mediation takes place in the commodity form, of which the human being is both subject and object. The non-identity of subject and object is a non-identity of social being and consciousness. Adorno’s critique of what he called “reconciliation philosophy” (of Hegel, et al.) is based on the desideratum of subjectivity: as yet there is no subject, only critical consciousness of its possibility; there can be only a negative recognition, a recognition of its present absence, which is socially and historically specific, however appropriating all past history and other social forms to its present forms of appearance.
For Adorno, it is precisely the non-identity of social being and consciousness, of theory and practice, that is salutary for their critical relation. As he put it in the “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,”

If, to make an exception for once, one risks what is called a grand perspective, beyond the historical differences in which the concepts of theory and praxis have their life, one discovers the infinitely progressive aspect of the separation of theory and praxis, which was deplored by the Romantics and denounced by the Socialists in their wake — except for the mature Marx. [266]

In his *Negative Dialectics* (1966), in a section titled “Objectivity and reification,” Adorno had written of the emancipatory aspect of the vision for “planning” in a socialist society in preserving the non-identity of subject and object:

In the realm of things there is an intermingling of both the object’s [non]identical side and the submission of men to prevailing conditions of production, to their own functional context which they cannot know. The mature Marx, in his few remarks on the character of a liberated society, changed his position on the cause of reification, the division of labor. He now distinguished the state of freedom from original immediacy. In the moment of planning — the result of which, he hoped, would be production for use by the living rather than for profit, and thus, in a sense, a restitution of immediacy — in that planning he preserved the alien thing; in his
design for a realization of what philosophy had only thought, at first, he
preserved its mediation. [192]

The “functional context which they cannot know” is capitalism, which generates
not only critical subjectivity, but the theory-practice problem as a non-identity of subject
and object of practice. By comparison, the 1960s radicals had anticipated overcoming
the separation of theory and practice immediately through their own efforts at (personal)
transformation. Such a mistaken configuration of the problem was to the detriment both
of practice and of critical consciousness, including to the present. In this they had been
encouraged by thinkers like Marcuse in their abandonment of the emancipatory
desiderata of history accumulated in the most radical exponents of Marxist politics that
the critical theory of the earlier Frankfurt School thinkers had sought to preserve against
the “vulgar Marxism” of both Social Democracy and Stalinism in the 1920s–30s — in the
aftermath of failed and betrayed revolution after 1917–19, the moment in which social-
political possibilities for overcoming capitalism opened to their greatest extent to date.
Following Adorno, properly accounting for the actual emancipatory contents of possible
social-politics, as Marx and later Marxist radicals had tried to do, continues to task the
present.
Adorno and Marcuse in 1969: the separation of theory and practice

The last letters between longtime colleagues and friends Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse in 1969, in which they debated the difficulties of their perspectives in the face of the 1960s New Left, help to situate Frankfurt School Critical Theory’s Marxism and its continued legacy. On the one hand, Adorno is notorious for calling the police on student demonstrators. But Adorno insisted nonetheless that Marx was not “obsolete” and socialism remained possible, if not immediately. On the other hand, Marcuse’s lectures of the time, such as “The End of Utopia” (1967), his interview in New Left Review on “The Question of Revolution” (1967), and his December 4, 1968 speech “On the New Left” made important concessions to the historical moment, against which Adorno sought to warn, in his final writings, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” and “Resignation,” which were developed directly from his correspondence with Marcuse. Responding to Adorno, Marcuse acknowledged the fatal mixture, “Rational and irrational, indeed counter-revolutionary demands are inextricably combined.” Marcuse thought that prominent New Left activists like “Danny the Red” Cohn-Bendit, who tried to scandalize Marcuse for his past work for the U.S. government during WWII, were isolated and ultimately minor figures. But Adorno grasped the significance of the kind of action advocated by those like Cohn-Bendit and Rudi Dutschke, especially in their self-conception, an “intransigence”

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4 See Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence on the German student movement,” New Left Review 1/233 (January–February 1999).


of ethical posturing rather than self-recognition. As Adorno put it to Marcuse, “[T]here are moments in which theory is pushed on further by practice. But such a situation neither exists objectively today, nor does the barren and brutal practicism that confronts us here have the slightest thing to do with theory anyhow.” Adorno and Marcuse’s prognoses on the 1960s New Left thus forecast on-going problems faced by political practice and theory with emancipatory intent, casting subsequent history into critical relief.

**Theory and practice: the historical moment of the 1960s**

Adorno and Marcuse differed in their estimations of the New Left, but this difference is misunderstood if it is taken to be between opposing and supporting the student and other protests of the 1960s. Rather, the difference between Adorno and Marcuse was in their estimation of the historical moment. Where Marcuse found a potential prelude to a future rather than an actual reinvigoration of the Left, let alone possible revolution, in the 1960s, Adorno was more critical of the direction of the New Left. Marcuse was also critical of the New Left, but accommodated it more than Adorno did. While Adorno might be mistaken for the more pessimistic of the two, it was actually Marcuse’s pessimism with respect to current and future prospects for Marxism that facilitated his greater optimism towards the New Left.

The late divergence of Marcuse from Adorno took place in the context of the turn in the New Left in 1969. Adorno grasped a waning of the moment and lowering of horizons that brought forth desperation from the students, whereas Marcuse thought that

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8 Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence,” 127.
future prospects remained open. The separation of theory from practice was both the background for and the result of the turn in the New Left by 1969. Where Marcuse tried to theoretically discern the potential, however obscure, in the New Left, Adorno prioritized a critical approach, and emphasized not merely the lack of theoretical self-awareness, but also the lack of political practices that could lead out of the crisis of the New Left by 1969.

Adorno emphasized the historical affinity of the late New Left moment with that of the crisis of the Old Left in the late 1930s. Adorno thought that history was repeating itself. Adorno maintained the need for a critical-theoretical approach that could sustain such historical consciousness. By contrast, Marcuse emphasized the potentially new historical situation of the 1960s, and, for Marcuse, this included the changed character of Adorno and Horkheimer’s Frankfurt Institute for Social Research itself. Marcuse thought that the Institute had become politically compromised such that its essential character differed fundamentally in the 1960s from the 1930s: it was part of the established order. Adorno pled for recognizing continuity, especially in his own thinking.

In addressing the difference between Adorno and Marcuse, it is important not to neglect other differences that informed and impinged upon their conflict. On the one hand, there were the student protesters, whose perspectives were quite different from either Marcuse’s or Adorno’s. On the other hand, there was Horkheimer’s rejection of the New Left, which was different from Adorno’s critique of it. The actual character of
Adorno’s critique of the New Left is lost if his perspective is assimilated to Horkheimer’s.

This affected the quality of Adorno’s correspondence with Marcuse in 1969, the documentary record of their disagreement. Marcuse called out Horkheimer’s statements in the press, and Adorno responded to Marcuse in defense of Horkheimer. But Adorno’s defense of Horkheimer’s statements, especially against their misrepresentation, did not mean that Adorno’s perspective was the same as Horkheimer’s or that he entirely agreed with him.

There were more than two sides, for or against the New Left. Neither Adorno nor Marcuse was either for or against the New Left: both supported the student and other protesters in certain respects, while both remained critical. Indeed, it was precisely such black-and-white thinking, either/or, for-or-against, that both Marcuse and Adorno thought was characteristic of prevailing authoritarianism in society, from which the New Left was not exempt. In this respect, Habermas’s pejorative characterization of the New Left as harboring “red fascist” tendencies spoke to the underlying continuity between the 1930s and the 1960s, which Adorno was keen to point out, and Marcuse did not deny, but only downplayed its importance in the moment.

The issue of Stalinism loomed in estimating the character of the New Left, for both Adorno and Marcuse. “Red fascism” was a term in the aftermath of the 1930s for characterizing precisely the problem of Stalinism. Marcuse thought the problem of Stalinism had waned in importance with respect to the politics of the New Left, whereas
Adorno thought that it remained, as bad if not worse than ever. This is the crucial respect in which Adorno’s thought differed from Horkheimer’s (and perhaps also from Habermas’s): Adorno did not regard the problem of Stalinism as having increased since the 1930s, whereas Horkheimer did. Horkheimer’s perspective may thus be characterized as sharing features of the trajectories of other post-WWII Marxists, towards “Cold War” liberalism and social democracy.

The difference between Adorno and Horkheimer that can become obscured regarding the disagreement with Marcuse traces back to the beginning of WWII, and the debate in the Institute about Friedrich Pollock’s “state capitalism” thesis. While Pollock was addressing Nazi Germany, this approach has also been regarded as characterizing Stalinism in the Soviet Union. At the time, Adorno differed from his colleagues, averring, in a rather orthodox Marxist way, that even Nazi Germany must be regarded as remaining “contradictory.” This would also apply to the Soviet Union. The question was the character of that contradiction. In what way did such new historical phenomena as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, as well as the New Deal U.S., still exhibit the contradiction of capital in Marx’s terms, in however historically transformed ways?

**Marcuse’s revision of Marx**

The issue of the contradiction of capital from a Marxist perspective arose for the 1960s New Left: In what ways had Marx and Marxist politics potentially become obsolete?

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Prior to his disagreements with Adorno in 1969 regarding the New Left, in 1967 Marcuse had delivered a speech on “The End of Utopia” in which he took issue with Marx’s conception of emancipation from capital. He began with the broadside against Marx cited above, which echoed a concern in Marcuse’s prior book, *Eros and Civilization* that he republished with a new Preface in the late 1960s. There, Marcuse appropriated Schiller’s account of the “play drive:” work was to become play. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse contemplated the possibility of a “work instinct,” or a need to labor that could be transformed in a more benign direction rather than being enlisted in combination with the “death drive,” as under capitalism. Upon its initial release, Horkheimer and Adorno had passed on publishing Marcuse’s book in Germany without comment.

In what ways was “work” still necessary? The problem with Marcuse’s critique of Marx’s supposed obsolescence was that it mischaracterized Marx’s account of necessity in capital. For Marx, capital exhibited precisely a *false* necessity to labor. It was the “false” character of necessity that Marx understood to be “alienation” in *capital*. Alienation was not the result of necessity, but a “false,” or *self-contradictory* necessity. Capital was not motivated by the material need for labor, but rather its social need, which had become potentially obsolete and thus “false.”

A commonplace misunderstanding, owing to vulgar “socialist” sloganeering, such as calling for “production for human needs not profit,” is that capitalism is motivated by profit-seeking. For Marx, capital may be *facilitated* by profit-seeking, and thus enlist the greed of capitalists, but this is for capital’s, that is, society’s own *self-alienated ends,*
namely, the preservation of value in the system. Where capitalism was supposed to be a means to serve the ends of humanity, humanity became the means for serving the ends of capital. But this is something that workers, in struggling against their own exploitation, also motivate. Marx’s point was that the value of labor had become self-contradictory and self-undermining in the post-Industrial Revolution society of capital: workers’ struggle for the value of their labor was self-contradictory and self-undermining. This was for Marx the “contradiction of capital:” labor was socially necessary only in a self-contradictory sense, in that workers can only acquire their needs through earning a wage, while human labor and thus the workers themselves become increasingly superfluous in the social system. This was why Marx articulated freedom and necessity in the way he did, not because he assumed the material necessity of human labor as the basis for society.

**Adorno’s recovery of Marx: labor in capital**

Marcuse, on the other hand, did assume such a necessity, if not materially, then socially and politically, in the sense of the necessary dignity of humanity that the *surplus population* of the Third World contradicted by the superfluity of their labor, which contrasted starkly, and with a politically invidious effect, against the abundance of the more industrially developed countries.

In “The Question of Revolution,” Marcuse stated that “the conception of freedom by which revolutionaries and revolutions were inspired is suppressed in the developed
industrialized countries with their rising standard of living.” This was no mere matter of redistribution of goods at a global scale, but a turning away from work for material abundance and accumulation.

Adorno questioned the direct connection between the anti-imperialist politics of the Vietnamese Communists and the discontents of the students. In his 1969 essay on “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (included as the last selection, one of the two “Dialectical Epilegomena” to Critical Models: Catchwords, the last collection of essays he edited for publication12), Adorno remarked that “it would be difficult to argue that Vietnam is robbing anyone of sleep, especially since any opponent of colonial wars knows that the Vietcong for their part practice Chinese methods of torture,” repeating language he had used in one of his last letters to Marcuse questioning Marcuse’s less-than-critical support for late-’60s student radicalism.

The center of Adorno’s “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” was the argument that the separation of theory and practice was “progressive,” that is, emancipatory. Adorno contrasted Marx with “Romantic socialism,” which considered the division of labor and not the self-contradiction of the value-form of labor in capital, as the source of alienation.

The recently translated conversation between Adorno and Horkheimer in 1956, “Towards a New Manifesto,”13 about the impossibility of critical theory divorced from

11 Excerpted in Dutschke, “On anti-authoritarianism.”
political practice, begins by addressing labor as “mediation.” Here, Adorno and Horkheimer addressed labor’s “ideological” function in advanced capitalism, that its social necessity is both “true” and “false.” For instance, Adorno says that if socialism means, at least at first, an equitable division of labor such that he must work as an “elevator attendant” for a couple of hours each day, he wouldn’t mind. In a fragmentary reflection from 1945, Adorno wrote of the “law of labor” under which contemporary reality is constrained and distorted: not the law of “capital,” but the law of labor.14

Andrew Feenberg has pointed out in Horkheimer and Adorno’s conversation the specter of Marcuse haunting them.15 But only Horkheimer mentioned Marcuse, trying to chastise Adorno’s political speculations. Adorno didn’t take the bait: evidently, he didn’t mind the association with Marcuse. Adorno’s differences with Marcuse developed as a function of the New Left. But Adorno’s disagreement with Marcuse was over the character of capitalism, not the New Left.

**Beyond labor?**

The difference more than 40 years after Marcuse and Adorno’s conflict over the New Left in 1969 is precisely the way capitalism has developed since then: the question of the possibility of a society beyond the compulsion to labor still looms, however differently. This is why Adorno’s recovery of Marx, rebutting Marcuse’s late doubts about historical

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Marxism, can still speak meaningfully and critically. The problem with capitalism today is not overabundance in consumer goods, as Marcuse along with other New Leftists thought, but rather the continued compulsion to labor that distresses society. This is why, in contrast to Marcuse, Adorno, with Marx, still considered emancipation to lie beyond and not in labor.

Adorno’s recovery of Marx’s original conception of “alienation” is important, not because the issues Marcuse raised were wrong, but rather because Marcuse’s perspective is liable to be assimilated to political perspectives, after the New Left, with which Marcuse himself would not have agreed. Marcuse’s assumptions about capitalism remain esoteric and hidden, taking too much for granted that remains invisible to his readers, whereas by contrast Adorno is explicit enough to earn his work’s rejection by the post-New Left politics whose problems he sought to critique. The basis of Marcuse’s apparent amenability to the New Left and its aftermath, however, is falsely assumed.
2. Gillian Rose’s “Hegelian” critique of Marxism

Gillian Rose’s *magnum opus* was her second book, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981).16

Preceding this was *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (1978), a work which charted Rose’s approach to the relation of Marxism to Hegel in *Hegel Contra Sociology*.17 Alongside her monograph on Adorno, Rose published two incisively critical reviews of the reception of Adorno’s work.18 Rose thus established herself early on as an important interrogator of Adorno’s thought and Frankfurt School Critical Theory more generally, and of their problematic reception.

In her review of *Negative Dialectics*, Rose noted, “Anyone who is involved in the possibility of Marxism as a mode of cognition *sui generis* . . . must read Adorno’s book.”19 As she wrote in her review of contemporaneous studies on the Frankfurt School,

Both the books reviewed here indict the Frankfurt School for betraying a Marxist canon; yet they neither make any case for the importance of the School nor do they acknowledge the question central to that body of work:

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the possibility and desirability of defining such a canon. As a result both books overlook the relation of the Frankfurt School to Marx for which they are searching. . . . They have taken the writings [of Horkheimer, Benjamin and Adorno] literally but not seriously enough. The more general consequences of this approach are also considerable: it obscures instead of illuminating the large and significant differences within Marxism.\textsuperscript{20}

Rose’s critique can be said of virtually all the reception of Frankfurt School Critical Theory.

Rose followed her work on Adorno with \textit{Hegel Contra Sociology}.\textsuperscript{21} As Rose put it in \textit{The Melancholy Science}, Adorno and other thinkers in Frankfurt School Critical Theory sought to answer for their generation the question Marx posed (in the 1844 \textit{Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts}), “How do we now stand as regards the Hegelian dialectic?”\textsuperscript{22} For Rose, this question remained a standing one.

Rose sought to recover Hegel from readings informed by 20th century neo-Kantian influences, and from what she saw as the failure to fully grasp Hegel’s critique of Kant. Where Kant could be seen as the bourgeois philosopher \textit{par excellence}, Rose took

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Rose, Review of \textit{The Origin of Negative Dialectics} and \textit{The Frankfurt School}, 126, 135.
\item The book’s original dust jacket featured a blurb by Anthony Giddens, Rose’s mentor and the \textit{doyen} of sociology, who called it “\textit{a very unusual piece of work} . . . whose significance will take some time to sink in.”
\item Rose, \textit{The Melancholy Science}, 2.
\end{enumerate}
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Hegel to be his most important and unsurpassed critic. Hegel provided Rose with the standard for critical thinking on social modernity, whose threshold she found nearly all others to fall below, including thinkers she otherwise respected such as Adorno and Marx.

Rose read Marx as an important disciple of Hegel who, to her mind, nevertheless, misapprehended key aspects of Hegel’s thought. According to Rose, this left Marxism at the mercy of prevailing Kantian preoccupations. As she put it, “When Marx is not self-conscious about his relation to Hegel’s philosophy . . . [he] captures what Hegel means by actuality or spirit. But when Marx desires to dissociate himself from Hegel’s actuality . . . he relies on and affirms abstract dichotomies between being and consciousness, theory and practice, etc.” (230–231). In offering this Hegelian critique of Marx and Marxism, however, Rose actually fulfilled an important desideratum of Adorno’s Marxist critical theory, which was to attend to what was “not yet subsumed,” or, how a regression of Marxism could be met by a critique from the standpoint of what “remained” from Hegel.

In his deliberate recovery of what Rose characterized as Marx’s “capturing” of Hegel’s “actuality or spirit,” Adorno was preceded by the “Hegelian Marxists” Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch. The “regressive” reading proposed by Adorno23 that could answer Rose would involve reading Adorno as presupposing Lukács and Korsch, who

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presupposed the Marxism of Lenin and Luxemburg, who presupposed Marx, who presupposed Hegel. Similarly, Adorno characterized Hegel as “Kant come into his own.”24 From Adorno’s perspective, the Marxists did not need to rewrite Marx, nor did Marx need to rewrite Hegel. For Adorno the recovery of Marx by the Marxists — and of Hegel by Marx — was a matter of further specification and not simple “progress.” This involved problematization, perhaps, but not overcoming in the sense of leaving behind.25 Marx did not seek to overcome Hegel, but rather was tasked to advance and fulfill his concerns. This comports well with Rose’s approach to Hegel, which she in fact took over, however unconsciously, from her prior study of Adorno, failing to follow what Adorno assumed about Marxism in this regard.

Two parts of Hegel Contra Sociology frame its overall discussion of the challenge Hegel’s thought presents to the critical theory of society: a section in the introductory chapter on what Rose calls the “Neo-Kantian Marxism” of Lukács and Adorno and the

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The author of these pages . . . believes that today it is of practical importance to return in this respect to the traditions of Marx-interpretation founded by Engels (who regarded the “German workers’ movement” as the “heir to classical German philosophy”), and by Plekhanov. He believes that all good Marxists should form, in Lenin’s words “a kind of society of the materialist friends of the Hegelian dialectic.”

But Hegel’s position today is the reverse of Marx’s own. The problem with Marx is precisely to take his method and his system as we find them and to demonstrate that they form a coherent unity that must be preserved. The opposite is true of Hegel. The task he imposes is to separate out from the complex web of ideas with its sometimes glaring contradictions all the seminal elements of his thought and rescue them as a vital intellectual force for the present. (xlv)
concluding section on “The Culture and Fate of Marxism.” The arguments condensed in these two sections of Rose’s book comprise one of the most interesting and challenging critiques of Marxism. However, Rose’s misunderstanding of Marxism limits the direction and reach of the rousing call with which she concluded her book: “This critique of Marxism itself yields the project of a critical Marxism. . . . Presentation of the contradictory relations between Capital and culture is the only way to link the analysis of the economy to comprehension of the conditions for revolutionary practice” (235). Yet Rose’s critique of Marxism, especially of Lukács and Adorno, and of Marx himself, misses its mark.

One problem regarding Rose’s critique of Marxism is precisely her focus on Marxism as a specifically “philosophical” problem, as a problem more of thought than of action. As Lukács’s contemporary Karl Korsch pointed out in “Marxism and Philosophy” (1923), by the late 19th century historians such as Dilthey had observed that “ideas contained in a philosophy can live on not only in philosophies, but equally well in positive sciences and social practice, and that this process precisely began on a large scale with Hegel’s philosophy.”26 For Korsch, this meant that “philosophical” problems in the Hegelian sense were not matters of theory but practice. From a Marxian perspective, however, it is precisely at the level of practice that the problem of capitalist society is posed. Korsch went on to argue that “what appears as the purely ‘ideal’ development of philosophy in the 19th century can in fact only be fully and essentially

grasped by relating it to the concrete historical development of bourgeois society as a whole." 27 Korsch’s great insight, shared by Lukács, took this perspective from Luxemburg and Lenin, who grasped how the history of Marxism was a key part, indeed the crucial aspect, of this development, at the time of their writing in the first years of the 20th century. 28

The most commented-upon essay of Lukács’s collection *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) is “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” written specifically as the centerpiece of the book, but drawing upon arguments made in the book’s other essays. Like many readers of Lukács, Rose focused her critique in particular on Lukács’s argument in the second part of his “Reification” essay, “The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought,” neglecting that its “epistemological” investigation of philosophy is only one moment in a greater argument, which culminates in the most lengthy and difficult third part of Lukács’s essay, “The Standpoint of the Proletariat.”


28. See, for instance: Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution?* (1900), in which Luxemburg pointed out that all reforms aimed at ameliorating the crisis of capital actually exacerbated it; Vladimir Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (1902), in which Lenin supposed that overcoming reformist “revisionism” in international (Marxist) social democracy would amount to and be the express means for overcoming capitalism; and Leon Trotsky, *Results and Prospects* (1906), in which Trotsky pointed out that the various “prerequisites of socialism” not only developed historically independently but also, significantly, antagonistically. In *The State and Revolution* (1917), Lenin, following Marx, critiqued anarchism for calling for the “abolition” of the state and not recognizing that the necessity of the state could only “wither away” as a function of the gradual overcoming of “bourgeois right” whose prevalence would persist in the revolutionary socialist “workers’ state” long after the overthrow of the bourgeoisie: the state would continue as a symptom of capitalist social relations without capitalists per se. In *Literature and Revolution* (1924), Trotsky pointed out that, as symptomatic products of present society, the cultural and even political expressions of the revolution could not themselves embody the principles of an emancipated society but could, at best, only open the way to them. For Lukács and Korsch (and Benjamin and Adorno following them — see Benjamin’s 1934 essay on “The Author as Producer,” in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott [New York: Schocken, 1986], 220–238), such arguments demonstrated a dialectical approach to Marxism itself on the part of its most thoughtful actors.
But it is in this part of the essay that Lukács addressed how the Marxist social-democratic workers’ movement was an intrinsic part of what Korsch had called the “concrete historical development of bourgeois society as a whole,” in which its “philosophical” problem lived. The “philosophical” problem Korsch and Lukács sought to address was the “dialectic” of the political practice of the working class, how it actually produced and did not merely respond to the contradictions and potentially revolutionary crisis of capitalist society. It is because of Rose’s failure to grasp this point that her criticism of Marx, Lukács, and Adorno amounts to nothing more than an unwitting recapitulation of Lukács’s own critique of what he called “vulgar Marxism,” and what Adorno called “positivism” or “identity thinking.” Lukács and Adorno, following Lenin and Luxemburg, attempted to effect a return to what Korsch called “Marx’s Marxism.”

In examining Rose’s critique of Lukács, Adorno, and Marx, and in responding to Rose’s Hegelian interrogation of their supposed deficits, it becomes possible to recover what is important about and unifies their thought. Rose’s questions about Marxism are those that any Marxian approach must answer to demonstrate its necessity — its “improved version,” as Lukács put it, of the “Hegelian original” dialectic.29

29. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, xlvi. Citing Lukács in her review of Buck-Morss and Tar on the Frankfurt School, Rose posed the problem of Marxism this way:

The reception of the Frankfurt School in the English-speaking world to date displays a paradox. Frequently, the Frankfurt School inspires dogmatic historiography although it represents a tradition which is attractive and important precisely because of its rejection of dogmatic or “orthodox” Marxism. This tradition in German Marxism has its origin in Lukács’s most un-Hegelian injunction to take Marxism as a “method” — a method which would remain valid even if “every one of Marx’s individual theses” were proved wrong. One can indeed speculate whether philosophers like Bloch, Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno would have become Marxists if Lukács had not pronounced thus. For other
The problem of Marxism as Hegelian “science”

In the final section of Hegel Contra Sociology, in the conclusion of the chapter “With What Must the Science End?” titled “The Culture and Fate of Marxism,” Rose addresses Marx directly. Here, Rose states that,

Marx did not appreciate the politics of Hegel’s presentation, the politics of a phenomenology [logic of appearance] which aims to re-form consciousness . . . [and] acknowledges the actuality which determines the formation of consciousness. . . . Marx’s notion of political education was less systematic than [Hegel’s]. (232–233)

One issue of great import for Rose’s critique of Marxism is the status of Hegel’s philosophy as “speculative.” As Rose wrote,

Marx’s reading of Hegel overlooks the discourse or logic of the speculative proposition. He refuses to see the lack of identity in Hegel’s thought, and therefore tries to establish his own discourse of lack of

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Marxists this position spells scientific “suicide.” (Rose, Review of The Origin of Negative Dialectics and The Frankfurt School, 126.)

Nevertheless, Rose used a passage from Lukács’s 1924 book in eulogy, Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought as the epigraph for her essay: “[T]he dialectic is not a finished theory to be applied mechanically to all the phenomena of life but only exists as theory in and through this application” (126). Critically, Rose asked only that Lukács’s own work — and that of other “Hegelian” Marxists — remain true to this observation.
identity using the ordinary proposition. But instead of producing a logic or discourse of lack of identity he produced an ambiguous dichotomy of activity/nature which relies on a natural beginning and an utopian end.

(231)

Rose explicated this “lack of identity in Hegel’s thought” as follows:

Hegel knew that his thought would be misunderstood if it were read as [a] series of ordinary propositions which affirm an identity between a fixed subject and contingent accidents, but he also knew that, like any thinker, he had to present his thought in propositional form. He thus proposed . . . a “speculative proposition.” . . . To read a proposition “speculatively” means that the identity which is affirmed between subject and predicate is seen equally to affirm a lack of identity between subject and predicate. . . . From this perspective the “subject” is not fixed: . . . Only when the lack of identity between subject and predicate has been experienced, can their identity be grasped. . . . Thus it cannot be said, as Marx, for example, said [in his *Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right”* (1843)], that the speculative proposition turns the predicate into the subject and therefore hypostatizes predicates, just like the ordinary proposition hypostatizes the subject. . . . [Hegel’s] speculative proposition is fundamentally opposed to [this] kind of formal identity. (51–53)
Rose may be correct about Marx’s 1843 critique of Hegel. She severely critiqued Marx’s 1845 “Theses on Feuerbach” on the same score (230). What this overlooks is Marx’s understanding of the historical difference between his time and Hegel’s. Consequently, it neglects Marx’s differing conception of “alienation” as a function of the Industrial Revolution, in which the meaning of the categories of bourgeois society, of the commodity form of labor, had become reversed.30

Rose’s failure to register the change in meaning of “alienation” for Marx compromised her reading of Lukács:

[M]aking a distinction between underlying process and resultant objectifications[,] Lukács was able to avoid the conventional Marxist treatment of capitalist social forms as mere “superstructure” or “epiphenomena;” legal, bureaucratic and cultural forms have the same status as the commodity form. Lukács made it clear that “reification” is

30. For instance, Marx begins the section on “Estranged Labour” of his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 with the following statement:

We have proceeded from the premises of political economy. We have accepted its language and its laws. . . . On the basis of political economy itself, in its own words, we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities; that the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production; that the necessary result of competition is the accumulation of capital in a few hands, and thus the restoration of monopoly in a more terrible form. (Robert C. Tucker, ed., Marx-Engels Reader 2nd ed. [New York: Norton, 1978], 70.)

Marx tasked himself with discerning the reasons that all of the disiderata of classical bourgeois political economy, of Adam Smith, et al., had not only failed to come to pass, but the historical development of capital had resulted in the very opposite of what had been desired and prognosed. Marx’s Capital can thus be understood as the explication of these reasons: the ways the commodity form of labor play out after the introduction of machine production in the Industrial Revolution.
the specific capitalist form of objectification. It determines the structure
of all the capitalist social forms. . . . [T]he process-like essence (the mode
of production) attains a validity from the standpoint of the totality. . . .
[Lukács’s approach] turned . . . away from a logic of identity in the
direction of a theory of historical mediation. The advantage of this
approach was that Lukács opened new areas of social life to Marxist
analysis and critique. . . . The disadvantage was that Lukács omitted many
details of Marx’s theory of value. . . . As a result “reification” and
“mediation” become a kind of shorthand instead of a sustained theory. A
further disadvantage is that the sociology of reification can only be
completed by a speculative sociology of the proletariat as the subject-
object of history. (30–31)

However, for Lukács the proletariat is not a Hegelian subject-object of history but a
Marxian one.31 Lukács did not affirm history as the given situation of the possibility of
freedom in the way Hegel did. Rather, following Marx, Lukács treated historical

31. See Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” 171–175:

The class meaning of [the thoroughgoing capitalist rationalization of society] lies
precisely in the fact that the bourgeoisie regularly transforms each new qualitative gain
back onto the quantitative level of yet another rational calculation. Whereas for the
proletariat, the “same” development has a different class meaning: it means the abolition
of the isolated individual, it means that the workers can become conscious of the social
character of labor, it means that the abstract, universal form of the societal principle as it
is manifested can be increasingly concretized and overcome. . . . For the proletariat
however, this ability to go beyond the immediate in search for the “remoter” factors
means the transformation of the objective nature of the objects of action.

The “objective nature of the objects of action” includes that of the working class itself.
structure as a problem to be overcome. History was not to be grasped as necessary, as Hegel affirmed against his contemporaries’ Romantic despair at modernity. Rose mistakenly took Lukács’s critique of capital to be Romantic, subject to the *aporiae* Hegel had characterized in the “unhappy consciousness.” Rose therefore misinterpreted Lukács’s revolutionism as a matter of “will.”

32. Such misapprehension of Marxism as voluntarism has been commonplace. Rosa Luxemburg’s biographer, the political scientist J. P. Nettl, in the essay “The German Social Democratic Party 1890–1914 as Political Model” (in *Past and Present* 30 [April 1965], 65–95), addressed this issue as follows:

Rosa Luxemburg was emphatically not an anarchist and went out of her way to distinguish between “revolutionary gymnastic,” which was “conjured out of the air at will,” and her own policy (see her 1906 pamphlet on *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions*). . . . [Later Communist historians have burdened her] with the concept of spontaneity . . . [But her’s] was a dynamic, dialectic doctrine; organization and action revived each other and made each other grow . . . . It may well be that there were underlying similarities to anarchism, insofar as any doctrine of action resembles any other. A wind of action and movement was blowing strongly around the edges of European culture at the time, both in art and literature as well as in the more political context of Sorel and the Italian Futurists. . . . [But] most important of all, Rosa Luxemburg specifically drew on a Russian experience [of the 1905 Revolution] which differed sharply from the intellectual individualism of Bakunin, [Domela-]Nieuwenhuis and contemporary anarchism. She always emphasized self-discipline as an adjunct to action — the opposite of the doctrine of self-liberation which the Anarchists shared with other European action philosophies. (88–89)

The German Left evolved a special theory of action. . . . Where the German Left emphasized action against organization, Lenin preached organization as a means to action. But action was common to both — and it was this emphasis on action which finally brought the German Left and the Russian Bolsheviks into the same camp in spite of so many serious disagreements. In her review of the Bolshevik revolution, written in September 1918, Rosa Luxemburg singled out this commitment to action for particular praise. Here she saw a strong sympathetic echo to her own ideas, and analyzed it precisely in her own terms:

“With . . . the seizure of power and the carrying forward of the revolution the Bolsheviks have solved the famous question of a ‘popular majority’ which has so long oppressed the German Social Democrats . . . not through a majority to a revolutionary tactic, but through a revolutionary tactic to a majority” (*The Russian Revolution*)

With action as the cause and not the consequence of mass support, she saw the Bolsheviks applying her ideas in practice — and incidentally provides us with clear evidence as to what she meant when she spoke of majority and masses. In spite of other
Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* is an attempt to give [Marx’s] *Capital* a phenomenological form: to read Marx’s analysis of capital as the potential consciousness of a universal class. But Lukács’s emphasis on change in consciousness as *per se* revolutionary, separate from the analysis of change in capitalism, gives his appeal to the proletariat or the party the status of an appeal to a . . . will. (233)

Nonetheless, Rose found aspects of Lukács’s understanding of Marx compelling, in a “Hegelian” sense:

The question of the relation between *Capital* and politics is thus not an abstract question about the relation between theory and practice, but a phenomenological question about the relationship between acknowledgement of actuality and the possibility of change. This is why the theory of commodity fetishism, the presentation of a contradiction between substance and subject, remains more impressive than any abstract

severe criticisms of Bolshevik policy, it was this solution of the problem by the Bolsheviks which definitely ensured them the support of the German Left. (91–92)

The possibilities adumbrated by modern sociology have not yet been adequately exploited in the study of political organizations, dynamics, relationships. Especially the dynamics; most pictures of change are “moving pictures,” which means that they are no more than “a composition of immobilities . . . a position, then a new position, etc., *ad infinitum*” (Henri Bergson). The problem troubled Talcott Parsons among others, just as it long ago troubled Rosa Luxemburg. (95)

This was what Lukács, following Lenin and Luxemburg, meant by the problem of “reification.”
statements about the relation between theory and practice or between capitalist crisis and the formation of revolutionary consciousness. It acknowledges actuality and its misrepresentation as consciousness. (233)

What is missing from Rose’s critique of Lukács, however, is how he offered a dialectical argument, precisely through forms of misrecognition (“misrepresentation”).

33. As Lukács put it in the Preface (1922) to History and Class Consciousness,

I should perhaps point out to the reader unfamiliar with dialectics one difficulty inherent in the nature of dialectical method relating to the definition of concepts and terminology. It is of the essence of dialectical method that concepts which are false in their abstract one-sidedness are later transcended (zur Aufhebung gelangen). The process of transcendence makes it inevitable that we should operate with these one-sided, abstract and false concepts. These concepts acquire their true meaning less by definition than by their function as aspects that are then transcended in the totality. Moreover, it is even more difficult to establish fixed meanings for concepts in Marx’s improved version of the dialectic than in the Hegelian original. For if concepts are only the intellectual forms of historical realities then these forms, one-sided, abstract and false as they are, belong to the true unity as genuine aspects of it. Hegel’s statements about this problem of terminology in the preface to the Phenomenology are thus even more true than Hegel himself realized when he said: “Just as the expressions ‘unity of subject and object’, of ‘finite and infinite’, of ‘being and thought’, etc., have the drawback that ‘object’ and ‘subject’ bear the same meaning as when they exist outside that unity, so that within the unity they mean something other than is implied by their expression: so, too, falsehood is not, qua false, any longer a moment of truth.” In the pure historicization of the dialectic this statement receives yet another twist: in so far as the “false” is an aspect of the “true” it is both “false” and “non-false.” When the professional demolishers of Marx criticize his “lack of conceptual rigor” and his use of “image” rather than “definitions,” etc., they cut as sorry a figure as did Schopenhauer when he tried to expose Hegel’s “logical howlers” in his Hegel critique. All that is proved is their total inability to grasp even the ABC of the dialectical method. The logical conclusion for the dialectician to draw from this failure is not that he is faced with a conflict between different scientific methods, but that he is in the presence of a social phenomenon and that by conceiving it as a socio-historical phenomenon he can at once refute it and transcend it dialectically. (xlvi–xlvii)

For Lukács, the self-contradictory nature of the workers’ movement was itself a “socio-historical phenomenon” that had brought forth a crisis at the time of Lukács’s writing: from this perspective, the working class and its politics were the most important phenomena and objects of critique to be overcome in capitalist society.
This is why the theory of commodity fetishism has become central to the neo-Marxist theory of domination, aesthetics, and ideology. The theory of commodity fetishism is the most speculative moment in Marx’s exposition of capital. It comes nearest to demonstrating in the historically specific case of commodity producing society how substance is ((mis-)represented as) subject, how necessary illusion arises out of productive activity. (232)

However, the contradiction of capital is not merely between “substance and subject,” but rather a self-contradictory social substance, value, which gives rise to a self-contradictory subject.34

Rose’s critique of the “sociological” Marxism of Lukács and Adorno

Rose’s misconstrual of the status of proletarian social revolution in the self-understanding of Marxism led her to regard Lukács and Adorno’s work as “theoretical” in the restricted sense of mere analysis. Rose denied the dialectical status of Lukács and Adorno’s thought by neglecting the question of how a Marxian approach, from Lukács and Adorno’s perspective, considered the workers’ movement for emancipation as itself symptomatic of capital. Following Marx, Lukács and Adorno regarded Marxism as the organized historical self-consciousness of the social politics of the working class that

potentially points beyond capital. Rose limited Lukács and Adorno’s concerns regarding “misrecognition,” characterizing their work as “sociological:”

The thought of Lukács and Adorno represent two of the most original and important attempts . . . [at] an Hegelian Marxism, but it constitutes a neo-Kantian Marxism . . . . They turned the neo-Kantian paradigm into a


According to [Marxian] theory, history is the history of class struggles. But the concept of class is bound up with the emergence of the proletariat. . . . By extending the concept of class to prehistory, theory denounces not just the bourgeois . . . [but] turns against prehistory itself. . . . By exposing the historical necessity that had brought capitalism into being, [the critique of] political economy became the critique of history as a whole. . . . All history is the history of class struggles because it was always the same thing, namely, prehistory. (93–94)

This means, however, that the dehumanization is also its opposite. . . . Only when the victims completely assume the features of the ruling civilization will they be capable of wresting them from the dominant power. (110)

This follows from Lukács’s conception of proletarian socialism as the “completion” of reification (“Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in History and Class Consciousness):

The danger to which the proletariat has been exposed since its appearance on the historical stage was that it might remain imprisoned in its immediacy together with the bourgeoisie. With the growth of social democracy this threat acquired a real political organisation which artificially cancels out the mediations so laboriously won and forces the proletariat back into its immediate existence where it is merely a component of capitalist society and not at the same time the motor that drives it to its doom and destruction. (196)

[E]ven the objects in the very centre of the dialectical process [i.e., the political forms of the workers’ movement itself] can only slough off their reified form after a laborious process. A process in which the seizure of power by the proletariat and even the organisation of the state and the economy on socialist lines are only stages. They are, of course, extremely important stages, but they do not mean that the ultimate objective has been achieved. And it even appears as if the decisive crisis-period of capitalism may be characterized by the tendency to intensify reification, to bring it to a head. (208)
Marxist sociology of cultural forms . . . with a selective generalization of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism. (29)

But, according to Rose, this “sociological” analysis of the commodity form remained outside its object:

In the essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” in *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács generalizes Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism by making a distinction between the total process of production, “real life-processes,” and the resultant objectifications of social forms. This notion of “objectification” has more in common with the neo-Kantian notion of the objectification of specific object-domains than with an “Hegelian” conflating of objectification, human praxis in general, with alienation, its form in capitalist society. (30)

Rose thought that Lukács thus undermined his own account of potential transformation: “Lukács’s very success in demonstrating the prevalence of reification . . . meant that he could only appeal to the proletariat to overcome reification by apostrophes to the unity of theory and practice, or by introducing the party as *deus ex machina*” (31). In this respect, Rose failed to note how Lukács, and Adorno following him, had deeply internalized the Hegelian problematic of Marxism, how Marxism was not the (mis)application but the reconstruction of the Hegelian dialectic under the changed social-historical conditions of capital. For Rose, Lukács’s concept of “reification” was too negative regarding the
“totality” of capital, which she thought threatened to render capital non-dialectical, and its emancipatory transformation inconceivable. But Rose’s perspective remains that of Hegel — pre-industrial capital.36

36. Just before she died in 1995, Rose wrote a new Preface for a reprint of Hegel Contra Sociology, which states that,

The speculative exposition of Hegel in this book still provides the basis for a unique engagement with post-Hegelian thought, especially postmodernity, with its roots in Heideggerianism. . . . [T]he experience of negativity, the existential drama, is discovered at the heart of Hegelian rationalism. . . . Instead of working with the general question of the dominance of Western metaphysics, the dilemma of addressing modern ethics and politics without arrogating the authority under question is seen as the ineluctable difficulty in Hegel. . . . This book, therefore, remains the core of the project to demonstrate a nonfoundational and radical Hegel, which overcomes the opposition between nihilism and rationalism. It provides the possibility for renewal of critical thought in the intellectual difficulty of our time. (viii)

Since the time of Rose’s book, with the passage of Marxist politics into history, the “intellectual difficulty” in renewing critical thought has only become worse. “Post-modernity” has not meant the eclipse or end, but rather the unproblematic triumph, of “Western metaphysics” — in the exhaustion of “postmodernism.” Consideration of the problem Rose addressed in terms of the Hegelian roots of Marxism, the immanent critique of capitalist modernity, remains the “possibility” if not the “actuality” of our time. Only by facing it squarely can we avoid sharing in Marxism’s “fate” as a “culture.” For this “fate,” the devolution into “culture,” or what Rose called “pre-bourgeois society” (234), threatens not merely a form of politics on the Left, but humanity: it represents the failure to attain let alone transcend the threshold of Hegelian modernity, whose concern Rose recovered. Rose had feared Marxism’s evident relapse to “pre-bourgeois society.”

Rose’s term for the post-1960s “New Left” historical situation is “Heideggerian postmodernity.” Robert Pippin, as a fellow “Hegelian,” in his brief response to the Critical Inquiry journal’s symposium on “The Future of Criticism,” titled “Critical Inquiry and Critical Theory: A Short History of Nonbeing” (Critical Inquiry Vol. 30, No. 2 [Winter 2004], 424–428), has characterized this similarly, as follows:

[T]he level of discussion and awareness of this issue, in its historical dimensions (with respect both to the history of critical theory and the history of modernization) has regressed. . . . [T]he problem with contemporary critical theory is that it has become insufficiently critical. . . . [T]here is also a historical cost for the neglect or underattention or lack of resolution of this core critical problem: repetition. . . . It may seem extreme to claim — well, to claim at all that such repetition exists (that postmodernism, say, is an instance of such repetition) — and also to claim that it is tied somehow to the dim understanding we have of the post-Kantian situation. . . . [T]hat is what I wanted to suggest. I’m not sure it will get us anywhere. Philosophy rarely does. Perhaps it exists to remind us that we haven’t gotten anywhere. (427–428)

Heidegger himself anticipated this result in his “Overcoming Metaphysics” (1936–46): “The still hidden truth of Being is withheld from metaphysical humanity. The laboring animal is left to the giddy whirl of its products so that it may tear itself to pieces and annihilate itself in empty nothingness” (The End
Hegel and Marx in the history of capital

Capital is completely unprecedented in the history of humanity, hence, any struggle for emancipation beyond capital is also completely unprecedented. While there is a connection between the unprecedented nature of the emergence of capital in history and the struggle to get beyond it, this connection can also be highly misleading, leading to a false symmetry between the transition into and within different periods of the transformations of modern capital, and a potential transition beyond capital.\textsuperscript{37} The revolt of the Third Estate, which initiated a still on-going and never-to-be-exhausted modern history of bourgeois-democratic revolutions, is both the ground for, and, from a Marxist


37. This is the meaning of Marx’s celebrated passage in \textit{The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte} (1852):

\begin{quote}
Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living. . . . [T]he beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he has assimilated the spirit of the new language and can produce freely in it only when he moves in it without remembering the old and forgets in it his ancestral tongue. . . .

The awakening of the dead in [the bourgeois revolutions] served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given tasks in imagination, not of taking flight from their solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk again. . . .

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself, before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required world-historical recollections in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead. There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase. (Tucker, ed., \textit{Marx-Engels Reader}, 595–597.)
\end{quote}
perspective, the now potentially historically obsolescent social form of politics from which proletarian socialist politics seeks to depart, to get beyond.38

38. Korsch, in “Marxism and Philosophy” (1923), recovered this aspect of Marx’s thought and politics, as the continuation but transformation of the revolt of the Third Estate, as follows:

Bourgeois historians of philosophy have hitherto either entirely ignored this essential and necessary relation between German Idealism and Marxism, or they have only conceived and presented it inadequately and incoherently. To grasp it properly, it is necessary to abandon the normal abstract and ideological approach of modern historians of philosophy for an approach that need not be specifically Marxist but is just straightforwardly dialectical, in the Hegelian and Marxist sense. If we do this, we can see at once not only the interrelations between German Idealist philosophy and Marxism, but also their internal necessity. Since the Marxist system is the theoretical expression of the revolutionary movement of the proletariat, and German Idealist philosophy is the theoretical expression of the revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie, they must stand intelligently and historically (i.e., ideologically) in the same relation to each other as the revolutionary movement of the proletariat as a class stands to the revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie, in the realm of social and political practice. There is one unified historical process of historical development in which an “autonomous” proletarian class movement emerges from the revolutionary movement of the Third Estate, and the new materialist theory of Marxism “autonomously” confronts bourgeois idealist philosophy. All these processes affect each other reciprocally. The emergence of Marxist theory is, in Hegelian-Marxist terms, only the “other side” of the emergence of the real proletarian movement; it is both sides together that comprise the concrete totality of the historical process.

This dialectical approach enables us to grasp the four different trends we have mentioned — the revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie, idealist philosophy from Kant to Hegel, the revolutionary class movement of the proletariat, and the materialist philosophy of Marxism — as four moments of a single historical process. This allows us to understand the real nature of the new science, theoretically formulated by Marx and Engels, which forms the general expression of the independent revolutionary movement of the proletariat. This materialist philosophy emerged from the most advanced systems of revolutionary bourgeois idealism; and it is now intelligible why bourgeois histories of philosophy had either to ignore it completely or could only understand its nature in a negative and — literally — inverted sense. (Marxism and Philosophy, 44–46)

The scientific socialism of Marx and Engels, correctly understood, stands in far greater contrast to [the] pure sciences of bourgeois society (economics, history or sociology) than it does to the philosophy in which the revolutionary movement of the Third Estate once found its highest theoretical expression. (69)

Another, contemporaneous, version of Korsch’s formulation of this issue can be found in “The Marxist Dialectic” (1923), available on-line at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxist-dialect.htm>:

[T]here are only two positions in question on the problem of dialectics... today. Either the dialectic is a standpoint today completely out-of-date, only historically respectable as
Hegel, as a philosopher of the time of the last of the great bourgeois-democratic revolutions marking the emergence of modern capital and its culmination in the manufacturing era, the French Revolution of 1789–1815, was for this reason a theorist of the revolt of the Third Estate. Marx, who came later, after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, and regarding the issue of proletarian “socialism,” faced problems Hegel did not. Nevertheless, for Marx, any possible “proletarian” revolution would inevitably be a bourgeois revolution, even as it came up against the inadequacy of this. This is what gives Hegel continued saliency: the character of the revolution in, through, and beyond capital.39 The bourgeois revolution — the history of capital — had become self-contradictory, and thus the significance of Hegel’s thought became ambivalent: it could be critical or affirmative of bourgeois society. Marx tasked himself, “dialectically,” with recognizing the self-contradictory character of bourgeois society that found its highest historical expression in the newly emergent revolutionary proletarian-


The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather it is dialectical, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness. . . . [P]erfection of the commodity character in a Hegelian self-consciousness inaugurates the explosion of its phantasmagoria.
socialist politics of his time, which thus pointed beyond itself. Proletarian socialism would “complete” and thus “negate” the bourgeois revolution. This, and not a way of thinking, explains Marx and Marxism’s difference from Hegel. Rose’s “Hegelian” critique of Marxism elided the crucial historical difference of industrial capital — or, for Marx, the crisis of bourgeois society.

40. As Marx posed the question, in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, “How do we now stand as regards the Hegelian dialectic?” (Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 106.)

With regard to the issue of “communism” itself, Marx displayed his own dialectical approach to its practice and theory:

> [W]e characterize communism itself because of its character as negation of the negation, as the appropriation of the human essence which mediates itself with itself through the negation of private property — as being not yet the true, self-originating position but rather a position originating from private property[.] . . .

Since . . . the real estrangement of the life of man remains, and remains all the more, the more one is conscious of it as such, it may be accomplished solely by putting communism into operation. . . .

History will come to it; and this movement . . . in theory we already know to be a self-transcending movement. . . . But we must regard it as a real advance to have gained beforehand a consciousness of the limited character as well as of the goal of this historical movement — and a consciousness which reaches out beyond it. (99)

41. With respect to this conception, see some of Marx’s earliest writings, which provided the points of departure for his more mature work, such as “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*” (1843), “On [Bruno Bauer’s] *The Jewish Question*” (1843), and *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847).

42. Indeed, this also explains the “Hegelianism” of Marx’s *Capital.*
Chapter IV. Adorno in the history of Marxism

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with Adorno’s work’s relation to the recovery of the central concerns of Marxism attempted by Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács in the early 1920s, and how Lukács and Korsch were inspired by Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg in their attempts to do so. The peculiar “subjective” or “idealistic” dimension of Marxism is thus specified, and Adorno’s work’s preoccupation with matters of subjectivity is justified by reference to this preceding history for Adorno’s Marxism.

In particular, the usually omitted and not merely neglected influence of Korsch’s 1923 essay on “Marxism and philosophy” for Adorno’s work, all the way up to Negative Dialectics and the writings of the last year of Adorno’s life that he considered to be “epilegomena” to the Negative Dialectics project, is demonstrated. Specifically, the Marxist focus on the problem of the relation of theory and practice was distinguished by Adorno from attempts to identify and thus collapse them.

The fundamental philosophy of history that is so informed by the foundation for Adorno’s work in the preceding writings of Lukács and Korsch in the early 1920s is addressed in terms of the regression and disintegration of the dialectic of theory and practice that Adorno thought jeopardized the possibility of critical theory itself, let alone revolutionary social-transformative politics. At the same time, this danger also expressed an opportunity for Adorno’s work, a condition of possibility for critical recognition that Adorno sought to sustain, what Adorno called the “sore” that continued to “fester” in the
“prevailing health” or problematic form of life in the reproduction of society in capitalism: Adorno called this condition of possibility a “return” in “changed situations.”

This was the “negative dialectic” or disintegrative self-contradiction and self-undermining of bourgeois society in capitalism that Adorno recovered from Marx’s work, specifically the self-contradiction and self-undermining of the social relations of the exchange of labor, which both necessitated the Marxist “Hegelian” self-consciousness of the workers’ movement for socialism and the critique of that movement’s threat of self-reification. This paradoxical movement of historical regression through repetition, the repetition of the demands for the rights of labor in the bourgeois revolution, allowed for the critique of the course of history from the vantage-point of past potentials that remained unfulfilled, but were, according to Adorno, not entirely left behind. Adorno thus found the potential critical standpoint on the possible transformation of society in history, particularly in the history of Marxism that had been degraded in the course of Adorno’s lifetime in the 20th century.

What made Lukács’s as well as Korsch’s works from the early 1920s so difficult to read properly was the lack of their object of critique. So their arguments became objectless and seemed “speculative” in the worst sense. In Adorno’s view, there was not in his lifetime something like the high Second International in crisis 1914-19, but rather much degraded political and social realities. This made it difficult to grasp Lukács and Korsch’s arguments, but Adorno attempted to salvage them and sustain their insights.
For Adorno, Lukács and Korsch had been engaged in the self-critique and the attempted advancement of the crisis of Marxism in the collapse of the Second International and in the difficulties of reformulating Marxism as revolutionary politics by Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky and the broader Third International. But the failure of this was not due to an error in thinking supposedly condensed in Lukács and Korsch’s works. Rather, the basis for the immanence of their critique of the newly formed Third International was lacking, why they had thought they were making a vital contribution to addressing the political problems of their time. So their works came to appear as “intellectual” only in the most limited sense. But this merely projected the limitations of subsequent readings onto the texts themselves, bereft of their original concrete context, the comparably high level of political disputes within the fledgling Third International 1919-22.

Ultimately, it was necessary for Adorno to try to go beyond Lukács’s own later self-criticism of History and class consciousness, in that Lukács had tried, supposedly mistakenly, to “out-Hegel Hegel,” as well as beyond Korsch’s later self-criticism of Marxism (starting in Marx’s own lifetime) as having “perfected theory” apart from political practice. But these self-criticisms expressed, respectively, Lukács’s own capitulation to Stalinism, as the “material reality” to which theory must have supposedly disciplined and subordinated itself, and Korsch’s adaptation to the “material practice” of the working class despite the effect of political defeat, internalizing this. According to Adorno, in this retrospective view of the later Lukács and Korsch, repudiation of their
earlier work seemed justified, but this was the justification of what happened to Marxism as “critical theory” as a function of the failure of the revolution: it became intolerable. To save not merely his own skin but his political credibility, Lukács had to change his mind; and, to remain critical, Korsch had to break from Marxism. Adorno called this (in Lukács’s case) an “extorted reconciliation” with political and social realities. But the real alternative, for Adorno, was to try to change the world, whose failure Stalinism had both expressed and reinforced, and to which anti-Stalinist perspectives such as Korsch’s had also adapted, sacrificing their insights. Seeking to avoid that fate, some remainder of what Adorno called the “once-gained freedom in consciousness” achieved by Lenin and Luxemburg, and attempted to be theoretically elaborated by Korsch and Lukács, needed to be preserved, however provisionally and seemingly devoid of political relevance: a “message in a bottle.” What condemned this in the later Lukács and Korsch’s view esteemed it for Adorno: indeed, they both condemned Adorno in particular for this.

The question is, what happened to Marxism as critical theory when evacuated of its object of critique, when divorced from political practice? It disintegrated. But this was not due to any supposed “antinomies” (self-contradictions in a non-dialectical sense) of Lukács and Korsch’s own thought from the early 1920s, but rather the degeneration and liquidation of Marxism, and the resulting regression of history, which had degraded theory. What Lukács and Korsch had attempted, the self-critique of Marxism, sustaining its “Hegelian self-consciousness,” could no longer make sense when there was no real
Marxism politically, and when even the workers’ movement for socialism, short of Marxism as the politics of its critical consciousness, had collapsed.

1. Origins of Adorno’s Marxism

At the time of the October Revolution in Russia, Adorno (born in 1903) was 14 years old. At the close of the potentially revolutionary crisis in Germany that came at the end of the war, during the revolt, civil war and counterrevolutionary violence that was precipitated, Adorno was only 15. He had been too young for military service and therefore did not experience directly the radicalization that the German defeat in the war had brought in 1918–19, as had, for instance, Horkheimer and Marcuse. Marcuse had participated in the workers’ and soldiers’ councils that sprung up at the time of the Kaiser’s abdication at the end of 1918, and in the Spartacist uprising of the terminal, radical phase of the crisis in early 1919, during which time the most famous radical Marxists in Germany, the leaders of the Spartacus League and founders of the German Communist Party, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, were murdered by Social-Democratic government-mandated Freikorps counterrevolutionary death squads. By contrast, during this time the teenage Adorno was still living in his relatively quiescent hometown of Frankfurt, being tutored in philosophy by his family’s friend Siegfried Kracauer, with whom he discussed Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason. However, despite this relative distance from direct experience of the tumult of political events, Adorno was the thinker in Frankfurt School Critical
Theory whose work most consistently incorporated the concerns and critically reflected upon the legacy of the emancipatory potential expressed by the moment of 1917–19.

The role of the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution and the radicalism of its historical moment had prompted a “return to Marx” in the early 1920s whose most brilliant expositions were made by Georg Lukács in History and Class Consciousness (1923) and Karl Korsch in “Marxism and Philosophy” (1923). Both these sought to recover the critical intent and purchase of Marx’s theory and politics in the aftermath of the collapse of international Social Democracy and the failure of global anticapitalist revolution in 1917–19. Their work, inspired by and picking up from the radical Left of pre-war international Social Democracy that informed the Bolshevik Revolution, the politics of both Lenin’s Russian Bolsheviks and Rosa Luxemburg’s German Spartacists, provides the departure for subsequent, Frankfurt School Critical Theory. The ultimate failure of the anticapitalist revolution that had opened most fully in Russia, but also manifested significantly elsewhere, in Germany, Hungary, Italy and beyond, prompted critical reflection on the social-emancipatory content of Marxist politics, in hope of its further development. However, because of the contrast of such radically searching work with the stifling political repression of Stalinist reaction in Russia and the international Communist movement under the rubric of “orthodoxy” after 1924, this critical Marxism came to be known by the misnomer of “Western” Marxism, which developed under conditions of relative intellectual freedom outside the official “Communist” world. Beginning in the 1920s–30s, Adorno’s work sought to sustain this critical “return to
Marx” in the period of triumphant counterrevolution that characterized the mid-20th century.

For in this period, Marxism itself became an affirmative ideology of reactionary, “advanced” capitalism, for its emancipatory content — and hence its profoundest critique of modern society — was lost. Marx had tried to develop a self-reflexive and critical-emancipatory approach to overcoming capitalism immanently. Just as Marx’s thought originated in the attempt at critique, from within, of the Left of the 19th century, the socialist workers movement (of Proudhon, et al.), Adorno’s thought, his sustained engagement with the critical theory of 20th century capitalism, necessarily pursued the immanent critique of Marxism. Hence, Adorno’s work is an attempt to “recover” Marx under more “advanced” conditions, and thus bring to conscious expression what had become, by the mid-20th century, the esoteric content of Marxist politics. However, because of the compromised nature of the ostensibly “Marxist” but manifestly Stalinized politics of his time, the evacuation of the social-emancipatory content of Marxism, Adorno’s work took the form of “critical theory,” the attempt to register the disparity between theory and practice, indicating this by provoking the critical recognition not only of how Marxism had failed, but how it might yet point beyond itself.

Attempting to steer clear of the vulgarized and Stalinized Marxism in the aftermath of the failed revolutions of 1917–19, the recognition of the importance of critical consciousness had been formative for the thought of Frankfurt School Critical Theorists like Adorno in the 1920s–30s. As pointed out by the historian of the Frankfurt
Institute Helmut Dubiel, as regards the role of consciousness, there had been no difference between Luxemburg and Lenin. From early on, the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists shared this perspective with their more directly political Marxist forebears:

[The] ascription of a continuum — that is, of a mediated identity — between proletarian class consciousness and socialist theory — united even such [apparently] divergent positions as those of Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin. . . . Georg Lukács formulated this conception in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Although this idea was traditionally held by the socialist intelligentsia . . . [this] speculative identity of class consciousness and social theory formed the self-consciousness of those socialist intellectuals who were not integrated into the SPD [German Social-Democratic Party] and KPD [German Communist Party] in the 1920s.¹

By comparison, the “Marxism” of both Stalinized international Communism and rump, post-WWI Social Democracy, as well as various oppositions to these, became ensnared in the antinomy presented by the contradiction — the important, constitutive non-identity — of social being and consciousness, practice and theory (or, as in debates around historical

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Marxism, “spontaneity” and “organization”\(^2\), whose dialectic had motivated the critical consciousness of practice for Marx as well as for the radicals in pre-1914 Social Democracy like Luxemburg and Lenin. As Karl Korsch put it in “Marxism and Philosophy” (1923),

> As scientific socialism, the Marxism of Marx and Engels remains the inclusive whole of a theory of social revolution . . . a materialism whose


> It is interesting to note that this concept of spontaneity is of central importance not just in Kant, but also in the Marxian theory of socialism. Moreover, both in Marx and more generally is socialist theory, it has the same dialectical quality, the same dual character . . . [as] in Kant. For the spontaneous action that Marx ascribes to the proletariat is supposed, on the one hand, to be an autonomous, rational, free form of action, action on the basis of known and comprehensible theory. At the same time, however, it contains an irreducible element, the element of immediate action that does not fit entirely into the factors that theoretically determine it; and, above all, it does not fit smoothly into the determining factors of history. On the contrary, even though it is determined by these, it seems to be a way leading out of them — in extreme contrast to all mechanistic interpretations of the course of history. You can see from this how this curious duality of spontaneity has continued to thrive, until it finally underwent a strange fate, on the one hand, of simply vanishing; that is to say, it too succumbed to the blind conformity to dominant power relations. On the other hand, in the minds of all those who have been opposed to this development, spontaneity has made itself independent in a strange way, and has split itself off from reason, as a protest against a mechanical determinism through cause and effect, and this protest applied to the presence of that determinism in socialist thought too. In this way it came close to anarchism even though anarchism had been subjected to astringent criticism in socialist theory. The greatest example of this protest is Rosa Luxemburg. . . . [T]he concept of spontaneity, which might be described as the organ or medium of freedom, refuses to obey the logic of non-contradiction, and is instead a unity of mutually contradictory elements. It points, therefore, to a strict conception of dialectic.

Importantly, the “protest against determinism” is located by Adorno in the pre-Stalinist period, in Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of the German Social-Democratic Party and international Marxist social democracy more generally, which she shared with Lenin. (See the note to Luxemburg’s biographer J. P. Nettl on the matter of “will,” above.)
theory comprehended the totality of society and history, and whose practice overthrew it. . . . The difference [now] is that the various components of [what for Marx and Engels was] the unbreakable interconnection of theory and practice are further separated out. . . . The umbilical cord has been broken.  

2. Lenin and Luxemburg in 1917 — Lukács and Korsch in 1923

The year 1917 is the most enigmatic and hence controversial date in the history of the Left, for it is marked by the most profound attempt to change the world that has ever taken place. The two most important names associated with the revolution that broke out at this time, in 1917 in Russia and in 1918 in Germany, are the 2nd International Marxist radicals Lenin and Luxemburg, each of whom played fateful roles in this moment. The two most important Marxist critical theorists who sought to follow Luxemburg and Lenin, to advance the historical consciousness and philosophical awareness of the problems of revolutionary politics in the wake of 1917, were Lukács and Korsch. While neither Lenin nor Luxemburg survived the revolutionary period that began in 1917, both Lukács and Korsch ended up disavowing and distancing themselves from their works, both published in 1923, that sought to elaborate a Marxist critical theory of the revolutionary proletarian socialist politics of Lenin and Luxemburg. While Lukács adapted his perspective to the prevailing conditions of Stalinism in the international

Communist movement, Korsch became a critic of “Marxist-Leninist” Bolshevism, and an important theorist of Left- or “council-communist” politics. Meanwhile, retrospectively, Luxemburg was pitted against Lenin according to a similar degeneration and disintegration of the revolutionary consciousness that had informed the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917.

The forms that this disintegration took involved the arraying of the principles of liberalism against those of socialism, or libertarianism against authoritarianism. Lenin and Lukács became emblems of authoritarian socialism, while Luxemburg and Korsch became associated with more libertarian, if not liberal, concerns. But what remained buried, under such a misapprehension of the disputed legacy of 1917, was the substance of agreement and collaboration, in the revolutionary Marxist politics of that moment, among all these figures. Behind the fact of Luxemburg’s close collaboration and practical political unity with Lenin was the intrinsic relationship of liberalism with socialism, and emancipation with necessity. Rather than associating, in such a one-sided manner, Lenin with revolutionary necessity, and Luxemburg with desirable emancipation, the task for Marxist critical theory was to show how necessity, possibility and desirability were related, for both Luxemburg and Lenin, in ways that not only allowed for, but actually had motivated their shared, mutual thought and action, in the revolution that opened in 1917. For both Lenin and Luxemburg had sought to articulate

4. For instance, see Rosa Luxemburg’s article in defense of Lenin’s Bolsheviks, “Blanquism and Social Democracy” (1906) (available on-line at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/06/blanquism.html>), in which she wrote that,
It is high time to finish with such scholasticism and all this hullabaloo to identify who is a “Blanquist” and who is an “orthodox Marxist.” Rather we need to know if the tactic recommended by comrade Plekhanov and his Menshevik comrades, which aims to work through the Duma as far as possible, is correct now; or, on the contrary, if the tactic we are applying, just like the Bolshevik comrades, is correct — the tactic based on the principle that the centre of gravity is situated outside the Duma, in the active appearance of the popular revolutionary masses. The Menshevik comrades have not yet been able to persuade anyone of the correctness of their views — and no-one will be persuaded any the more when they attach the Blanquist label to their opponents.

This was echoed later by Luxemburg’s defense of the Bolshevik Revolution, in one of her last written and published articles, titled “The Russian Tragedy” (1918) (available on-line at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/09/11.htm>), where she wrote that,

The awkward position that the Bolsheviks are in today, however, is, together with most of their mistakes, a consequence of basic insolubility of the problem posed to them by the international, above all the German, proletariat. To carry out the dictatorship of the proletariat and a socialist revolution in a single country surrounded by reactionary imperialist rule and in the fury of the bloodiest world war in human history — that is squaring the circle. Any socialist party would have to fail in this task and perish — whether or not it made self-renunciation the guiding star of its policies. We would like to see the spineless jelly-fish, the moaners, the [Menshevik] Axelrods, Dans, or whatever their names are, who, mouths frothing, sing their plaintive song against the Bolsheviks in foreign lands. And — just look! — they have found a sympathetic ear in such heroes as Bernstein and Kautsky; we would like to see these Germans in the Bolsheviks’ place! All their superior understanding would rapidly exhaust itself in an alliance with the Milyukovs in domestic policy and with the Entente in foreign policy; to this would be added a conscious renunciation of all socialist reforms, or even of any move in this direction, in domestic policy — all this due to the conscious eunuch wisdom that says Russia is an agricultural country and Russian capitalism is not adequately cooked.

Beginning during the 1905 Russian Revolution, Luxemburg consistently sided with Lenin’s Bolsheviks in pre-WWI intra-party disputes, writing one of her more famous pamphlets, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* (1906) while staying with Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders in Finland (Nettl 1966, 355–357). See also Luxemburg’s December 20/28, 1918 article, in which she identified her own politics with “Bolshevisim,” titled “German Bolshevism” or “What is Bolshevism?” (available on-line at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/12/20.htm>).

J.P. Nettl wrote that,

A personal sympathy between Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg — based, like all Lenin’s friendships, on mutual respect — was born at this time [in 1906] and was to survive for six years until party differences drowned it once more in the froth of polemics. Even then a spark of personal sympathy always survived the renewed hostilities. (Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* v. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 357.)

Furthermore, Hannah Arendt wrote that “there were few people [Luxemburg] respected [as intellectual equals], and [Leo] Jogiches headed a list on which only the names of Lenin and [Marx’s biographer] Franz Mehring could be inscribed with certainty.” In 1911, Luxemburg wrote, “Yesterday Lenin came, and up to today he has been here four times already. I enjoy talking with him, he's clever and well educated, and has such an ugly mug, the kind I like to look at” (“Rosa Luxemburg, 1870–1919”, in *Men in Dark Times* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968], 41, 43, 44, 45, 54). Luxemburg wrote that her cat Mimi “impressed Lenin tremendously, he said that only in Siberia had he seen such a magnificent creature, that
and fulfill the concerns of liberalism with socialism (for instance, in Lenin’s qualified endorsement of self-determination against national oppression, how Lenin advocated the revolutionary social democratic workers’ movement leading role in democratic and liberal political struggles of all kinds).

Lukács and Korsch were the first to have rigorously explored the theoretical implications of the shared politics of Luxemburg and Lenin, in their works *History and Class Consciousness* and “Marxism and Philosophy,” both published in 1923. Both Lukács and Korsch approached what they considered the practical and theoretical breakthrough of the 3rd International Marxist communism of Luxemburg and Lenin, by a return to the “Hegelian” roots of Marxism, a reconsideration of its “idealist” dimension, against a “materialist” objectivistic metaphysics (that had lied behind “economism,” for example). This involved, for Lukács and Korsch, an exploration of Lenin and Luxemburg’s break from the objectivistic “vulgar Marxism” of the politics and theory of the 2nd International, exemplified by its premier theorist Karl Kautsky. Lukács’s term for such objectivism was “reification;” Korsch addressed it by way of Marx’s approach to the philosophical problem of “theory and practice,” which Korsch said had become “separated out” in the 2nd International period, their “umbilical cord broken,” whereas

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she was . . . a majestic cat. She also flirted with him, rolled on her back and behaved enticingly toward him, but when he tried to approach her she whacked him with a paw and snarled like a tiger” (Georg Adler, Peter Hudis, Annelies Laschitza, eds., *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* [London: Verso, 2011], 298).
Lenin and Luxemburg had tried to bring Marxist theory and practice back into productive
tension, and advance their relation through revolutionary Marxist politics.\footnote{See Rosa Luxemburg’s praise of the Bolsheviks in her posthumously published pamphlet \textit{The Russian Revolution} (1918) in \textit{The Russian Revolution and Leninism or Marxism} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 80:

All of us are subject to the laws of history. . . . The Bolsheviks have shown that they are capable of everything that a genuine revolutionary party can contribute within the limits of historical possibilities. . . . What is in order is to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, the kernel from the accidental excrescencies in the politics of the Bolsheviks. In the present period, when we face decisive final struggles in all the world, the most important problem of socialism was and is the burning question of our time. It is not a matter of this or that secondary question of tactics, but of the capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. In this, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the first, those who went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world; they are still the only ones up to now who can cry with Hutten: “I have dared!” This is the essential and \textit{enduring} in Bolshevik policy. In this sense theirs is the immortal historical service of having marched at the head of the international proletariat with the conquest of political power and the practical placing of the problem of the realization of socialism, and of having advanced mightily the settlement of the score between capital and labor in the entire world. . . . And in this sense, the future everywhere belongs to “Bolshevism.”

Furthermore, as J.P. Nettl pointed out in his biography of Luxemburg (1966),

The . . . items in [Luxemburg’s] \textit{The Russian Revolution} [that] dealt with Bolshevik policy with regard to the Constituent Assembly and suffrage . . . criticized the Bolsheviks’ action in dispersing the Constituent Assembly, which they themselves had called, and in restricting the suffrage. The details were not important, and these — but only these — she later retracted. . . . She was wrong in supposing that a kind of mass pressure on a Constituent Assembly in Russia, moving it forward and keeping it Socialist, was available; quite the contrary. (700–701) . . .

Rosa Luxemburg’s pamphlet on the Russian Revolution has become famous as an almost clairvoyant indictment of the Bolsheviks. In part this is justified. But its purpose will be better served if we see it as an analysis of ideal revolution based, like so much of Rosa Luxemburg’s work, on a form of critical dialogue, in this base with the Bolshevik October Revolution. Those who are made joyful by criticism of the fundamentals of the Bolshevik revolution would do better to turn elsewhere. (704–705) . . .

Any search of Rosa’s writings for specific approval or disapproval of the Russian example . . . is based on a misunderstanding of her attitude and her situation. . . . [Luxemburg wrote:] “If our party is full of enthusiasm for Bolshevism . . . then it is no more than enthusiasm coupled with the spirit of criticism — what more can people want from us?” (716) . . .

Possibly the only factual error to which [Luxemburg] ever admitted was her support for a Constituent Assembly in Russia at the beginning of 1918. For the rest, she had always insisted that the problem of terror and the suppression of democracy were phenomena of isolation, and a world-wide, or at least European, revolution would do away with them. But they were no less reprehensible for being temporary.
Lukács and Korsch both attempted to grasp the issue of subjectivity, or the “subjective” dimension of Marxism. But it was this focus on subjectivity from which both Lukács and Korsch broke in their subsequent development, Lukács making his peace with Stalinist “dialectical materialism,” while later attempting to found a “Marxist ontology,” and Korsch distancing himself from what he came to call, pejoratively, the “metaphysical” presuppositions of Marxism.

Lukács and Korsch’s trajectory away from their 1923 writings reflected, in their own ways, the return of the “vulgar Marxism” they had sought to supersede, in their theoretical digestion of 1917, a return marked by the Stalinization of the international Communist movement beginning in the 1920s. For example, Adorno was excited to meet Lukács in Vienna in 1925, only to be repulsed at Lukács’s disavowal of the work that had so strongly inspired Adorno and his closest colleagues in Frankfurt School Critical Theory such as Benjamin and Horkheimer. Korsch, who had also, like Lukács, been associated with the Frankfurt School from its inception in 1922, came, by the end of the 1930s, to scorn the Frankfurt Critical Theorists as “Marxist metaphysicians,” while Lukács wrote of them contemptuously, as having taken up residence at the “Grand Hotel Abyss,” explicitly deriding them for following his early work. In such disavowals could

In any case, all the evidence shows that she was willing and anxious to collaborate with the Russians, to learn from their experience, and to agitate as strongly as possible for a link between revolutionary Russia and revolutionary Germany. . . . But this did not imply any admission of Russian precedence, or the subordination of German tactics to the dictates of Moscow. . . . [T]his problem simply did not exist. Lenin and the Bolsheviks were willing to admit, if not the primacy of the German revolution over the Russian — though there is some evidence of this — at least the critical importance to the Soviet Union of Communist success in Germany. The Bolsheviks were prepared to make real sacrifices for this. . . . Rosa was the last to prefer abstract criticisms of other people’s activities [which] was [Karl] Kautsky’s specialty. (718–719)
be found evidence for the repression of the problems Lukács and Korsch had sought to address in elaborating Marxist theory from Lenin and Luxemburg’s revolutionary thought and action in 1917–19.

As a function of subsequent history, the relation between “means” and “ends” for the Marxist radicals Lenin and Luxemburg in the moment of 1917 became obscured. Lenin became caricatured as believing, in some Machiavellian fashion, that the “ends justified the means,” or exemplifying “revolutionary will.” Luxemburg was equally caricatured, as an upholder of principled emancipatory means, in extolling the virtues of practical defeat, seemingly happy to remain a Cassandra of the revolution. Lenin came to stand for “organization,” and Luxemburg for “spontaneity,” travestying both. Biographically, this was crudely resolved in the image of Luxemburg’s quixotic martyrdom during the Spartacist uprising of 1919, and in Lenin’s illness and subsequent removal from political power at the end of his life, condemned to watch, helpless, the dawn of the Stalinist authoritarianism to which his political ruthlessness and pursuit of revolutionary ends had supposedly led. In either case, rather than a determined investigation of these revolutionary Marxists’ thought and action, at the level of the basis for their self-understanding and political judgment, models from which it might have been possible to learn, elaborate and build upon further, they were regarded only as emblems of competing principles, in the abstract. Tactical considerations were falsely generalized into matters of principle. So Lenin’s writings and actions were scoured for any hint of authoritarian inhumanity, and Luxemburg’s for anything that could be framed
for their supposedly more humane compassion. At the same time, even in their being falsely divorced retrospectively, the futility of both their politics was naturalized: it was tacitly understood that neither what Lenin nor Luxemburg aspired to achieve was actually possible for them to have accomplished. They became, at best, tragically, at worst, monstrously utopian figures.

However, according to Adorno’s writing on the legacy of Lenin, Luxemburg, Korsch and Lukács in his last completed book *Negative Dialectics* (1966), this way of approaching 1917 and its significance evinced “dogmatization and thought-taboos.”6 The thought and action of Lenin and Luxemburg were approached dogmatically, and their Marxism as well as that of their critical-theoretical inheritors, Lukács, Korsch, Benjamin and Adorno himself, were approached only with a powerful thought-taboo firmly in place: that the revolutionary moment of 1917 was doomed to failure, and that its fate was tragically played out in the character of the revolutionary Marxism of that time. Their Marxism was thus buried, in an attempt to ward off the haunting accusation that it did not fail so much as there was a failure to learn from it. But, according to Adorno, as in the cases of Lukács and Korsch’s subsequent developments, after they became convinced of the “errors of their ways,” the problematic legacy of 1917 has not been recognized and understood, but only rationalized, in an affirmation of history as it had unfolded.

The Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 remained a question — the very same question that Lenin and Luxemburg very self-consciously went about trying address in

theory and practice — whether it was asked explicitly or not. It was the great tabooed subject, even if that taboo was enforced, either by a mountain of calumny heaped upon it, or the “praise” it earned in Stalinist or “Trotskyist” communist “adherence.” For example, it remained unclear whether the “soviets” or “workers’ councils” that sprung up in the revolutions of 1917–19 could have ever been proven in practice to be an adequate social-political means (for beginning) to overcome capitalism. The Lukács of the revolutionary period had recognized the danger that,

[As Hegel said,] directly before the emergence of something qualitatively new, the old state of affairs gathers itself up into its original, purely general, essence, into its simple totality, transcending and absorbing back into itself all those marked differences and peculiarities which it evinced when it was still viable. . . . [I]n the age of the dissolution of capitalism, the fetishistic categories collapse and it becomes necessary to have recourse to the “natural form” underlying them.7

Lukács thus recognized that the “producers’ democracy” of the “workers’ councils” in the revolutionary “dictatorship of the proletariat” was intrinsically related to, and indeed the political expression of, an intensification of the “reification” of the commodity form. Nevertheless, it seemed that the attempt, by Lenin and Trotsky’s Bolsheviks, to bring “all power to the soviets” in the October Revolution of 1917, and by Luxemburg’s Spartacists

in the German Revolution that followed, was important to try to learn from, despite its failure. For this revolutionary moment raised all the haunting questions, and at the most profound levels, of the problematic relationship between capitalism and democracy.

Korsch recognized that the revolutions of 1917–19 were the outcome of a “crisis of Marxism” that had previously manifested in the 2nd International, in the turn-of-the-century reformist “revisionist” dispute against Eduard Bernstein, et al., in which the younger generation of radicals, Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky first cut their teeth. But, according to Korsch in 1923, this “crisis of Marxism” remained unresolved. The revolutionary moment of 1917 could thus be said to be the highest expression of the “crisis of Marxism,” that Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky, and Korsch and Lukács after them, recognized as manifesting the highest expression of the crisis of capitalism, in the period of war, revolution, counterrevolution, civil war and reaction that set the stage for subsequent 20th century history. For Adorno, the world never really overcame or even recovered from this crisis of the early 20th century, but only continued to struggle with its still-unresolved aftermath. In this sense, 1917 was not, in the self-understanding of its actors and thinkers, an attempt to leap from the realm of necessity, but rather the attempt


[A] real possibility of a potentially liberated society [in the 1920s and subsequently] . . . only seemed so: already in the twenties, as a consequence of the events of 1919, the decision had fallen against that political potential that, had things gone otherwise, with great probability would have influenced developments in Russia and prevented Stalinism. It is hard to avoid the conclusion [of] this twofold aspect — on the one hand, a world that could have taken a turn for the better and, on the other, the extinguishing of that hope by the establishment of powers that later revealed themselves fully in fascism. (43)
to advance a necessity, the necessity of social revolution and transformation, to a higher stage, and thus open a new realm of possibility.

The enigmatic silence that had come to surround the question of 1917 and its problematic legacy was masked by a deafening din of opprobrium meant to prevent hearing it. It remained, as Benjamin put it, an “alarm clock that rings continuously.”

But, the degree to which those who came later did so, the repression of 1917 was achieved only at the cost of a regression that, as Benjamin put it, did not cease to consume the past and the ability to learn from it, ceding the meaning of history and its sacrifices to “the enemy,” and rendering those sacrifices in past struggles vain.

Recognizing the nature of the difficulty of 1917, that the problems found in this moment comprised the essence of its potential pertinence, was the first step in recognizing the character of the regression undergone since then. Like a troubling memory in an individual’s life that impinges upon consciousness, the memory of 1917 that troubled

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To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious. (255)
one’s conceptions of social-political possibilities could help reveal the problems one sought to be overcome, the same problems against which Lenin and Luxemburg had struggled, even if in failure, a brilliant failure from which, according to Adorno, one could not afford to be disinherited.\textsuperscript{11}

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\textsuperscript{11} In an aphorism titled “Bequest,” in \textit{Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life}, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), Adorno wrote,
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If [Walter] Benjamin said [in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940)] that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things that were not embraced by this dynamic. \ldots It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. \ldots Benjamin’s writings are an attempt in ever new ways to make philosophically fruitful what has not yet been foreclosed by great intentions. The task he bequeathed was not to abandon such an attempt to the estranging enigmas of thought alone, but to bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts: the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically. (151–152)

Furthermore, in \textit{Negative Dialectics} (1966), trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), Adorno wrote,

Those who chide theory [for being] anachronistic obey the \textit{topos} of dismissing, as obsolete, what remains painful [because it was] thwarted. They thus endorse the course of the world — defying which is the idea of theory alone. \ldots If [one] resists oblivion — if he resists the universally demanded sacrifice of a once-gained freedom of consciousness — he will not preach a Restoration in the field of intellectual history. The fact that history has rolled over certain positions will be respected as a verdict on their truth content only by those who agree with Schiller that “world history is the world tribunal.” What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations. (143–144)
3. Adorno and Korsch on Marxism and philosophy

[Marx wrote,] “[Humanity] always sets itself only such problems as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely it will always be found that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or are at least understood to be in the process of emergence.” 12 This dictum is not affected by the fact that a problem which supersedes present relations may have been formulated in an anterior epoch. 13

The original publication of Korsch’s seminal essay “Marxism and Philosophy” coincided with Lukács’s 1923 collection of essays, History and Class Consciousness. While Lukács’s book has the word “history” in its title, it follows Marx’s Capital in addressing the problem of social being and consciousness in a primarily “philosophical” and categorial manner, as the subjectivity of the commodity form. Korsch’s essay on philosophy in Marxism, by contrast, is actually a historical treatment of the problem from Marx and Engels’s time through the 2nd International to the crisis of Marxism and the revolutions of 1917–19. More specifically, it takes up the development and vicissitudes of the relation between theory and practice in the history of Marxism, which is considered the “philosophical” problem of Marxism.

Independently of one another, both Korsch’s and Lukács’s 1923 works shared an interest in recovering the Hegelian or “idealist” dimension of Marx’s thought and politics. Both were motivated to establish the coherence of the Marxist revolutionaries Lenin and Luxemburg, and these 2nd International-era radicals’ shared grounding in what Korsch called “Marx’s Marxism.” Their accomplishment of this is all the more impressive when it is recognized that it was made without benefit of either of the two most important texts in which Marx explicitly addressed the relation of his own thought to Hegel’s, the 1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (first published in 1932) or the notes for Capital posthumously published as the Grundrisse (1939), and also without access to Lenin’s 1914 notebooks on Hegel’s Science of Logic (1929). Due to a perceived shortcoming in the expounding of revolutionary Marxism, the problem for Korsch and Lukács was interpreting Marxism as both theory and practice, or how the politics of Lenin and Luxemburg (rightly) considered itself “dialectical.” Both Lukács and Korsch explicitly sought to provide this missing exposition and elaboration.

Lukács and Korsch were later denounced as “professors” in the Communist International, a controversy that erupted after the deaths of Luxemburg and Lenin. (Another important text of this moment was Lukács’s 1924 monograph in eulogy, Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought.) In the face of this party criticism, Lukács

14. For excellent interpretation of “idealism” as the philosophical issue being discussed here, namely, in Kant’s sense of exploring the a priori conditions of possibility for rational subjectivity, see Robert Pippin’s work on German Idealism, especially Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness (Cambridge University Press: 1989), and The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath (Cambridge University Press, 2005).
acquiesced and made his peace with Stalinized “orthodoxy.” Eventually disavowing his work of 1919–24 as comprising a misguided attempt to “out-Hegel Hegel,” Lukács even attempted to destroy all the existing copies of the unpublished “Tailism and the Dialectic,” his brilliant 1925 defense of *History and Class Consciousness*.

Korsch responded differently to the party’s criticism. Quitting the 3rd International Communist movement entirely, he became associated with the “Left” or “council” communism of Antonie Pannekoek, Paul Mattick, et al. Though making a choice very different from Lukács and distancing himself from official “Marxism-Leninism,” Korsch also came to disavow his earlier argument in “Marxism and Philosophy.” Specifically, he abandoned the attempt to establish the coherence of Lenin’s theory and practice with that of Marx, going so far as to critique Marx’s own Marxism. Thus, in “The Present State of the Problem of ‘Marxism and Philosophy:’ An Anti-Critique” (1930), Korsch argues that, to the degree Marx shared a common basis with Lenin, this was an expression of limitations in Marx’s own critical theory and political practice. Indeed, for Korsch it was a problem of “Marxism” in general, including that of Kautsky and Luxemburg. Ultimately, Korsch called for “going beyond” Marxism.

The complementary, if divergent, trajectories of Korsch and Lukács are indicative of the historical disintegration of the perspective both shared in their writings of 1923. Both had understood the “subjective” aspect of Marxism to have been clarified by

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15. Apparently he failed, since a copy was eventually found in Soviet archives. This remarkable document was translated and published in 2000 as *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness* (London: Verso).
Lenin’s role in the October Revolution. The figure of Lenin was irreducible, and brought out dimensions of the Marxist project that otherwise lay unacknowledged. As Adorno put it in private discussion with Horkheimer in 1956,

I always wanted to produce a theory that would be faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin. . . . Marx was too harmless; he probably imagined quite naïvely that human beings are basically the same in all essentials and will remain so. It would be a good idea, therefore, to deprive them of their second nature. He was not concerned with their subjectivity; he probably didn’t look into that too closely. The idea that human beings are the products of society down to their innermost core is an idea that he would have rejected as milieu theory. Lenin was the first person to assert this.16

In this discussion, Adorno also proposed to Horkheimer that they “should produce a reworked [version of Marx and Engels’s] Communist Manifesto that would be ‘strictly Leninist’.”17

No less than Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness, Korsch’s “Marxism and Philosophy” inspired the work of the Marxist critical theorists associated with the


Frankfurt School — Horkheimer, Marcuse, Benjamin, and Adorno. But the reputation of
Korsch’s work has been eclipsed by that of Lukács. What the usual interpretive emphasis
on Lukács occludes is that the Frankfurt School writers grappled not only with the
problem of Stalinism but “anti-Stalinism” as well.18 Both Korsch’s and Lukács’s post-

18. From Phil Slater, *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School: A Marxist Perspective* (London:

[Horkheimer wrote, in “The Authoritarian State” (1940),]

“The concept of a transitional revolutionary dictatorship was in no way intended to mean
the monopoly of the means of production by some new elite. Such dangers can be
countered by the energy and alertness of the people themselves. . . . [The revolution that
ends domination is as far-reaching as the will of the liberated. Any resignation is already
a regression into prehistory. . . . The recurrence of political reaction and a new
destruction of the beginnings of freedom cannot theoretically be ruled out, and certainly
not as long as a hostile environment exists. No patented system worked out in advance
can preclude regressions. The modalities of the new society are first found in the process
of social transformation.] The theoretical conception which, following its first trail-
blazers [such as Lenin and Luxemburg], will show the new society its way — the system
of workers’ councils — grows out of praxis. The roots of the council system go back to
1871, 1905, and other events. Revolutionary transformation has a tradition that must
continue.” (66)

The Frankfurt School’s respect for [Lenin] was due in large measure to his ability to
retain the dynamic unity of party, theory and class, a unity subsequently lost. Marcuse’s
*Soviet Marxism* [1958] is here representative of the entire Frankfurt School:

“During the Revolution, it became clear to what degree Lenin had succeeded in basing
his strategy on the actual class interests and aspirations of the workers and peasants. . . .
Then, from 1923 on, the decisions of the leadership increasingly dissociated from the
class interests of the proletariat. The former no longer presuppose the proletariat as a
revolutionary agent but rather are imposed upon the proletariat and the rest of the
underlying population.” (66–67)

Looking round for a possible *practical* exponent of [the] views of the Frankfurt School,
one immediately encounters the figure of Trotsky. . . . [Trotzky maintained that the
bureaucratism of the USSR] completely disregarded Lenin’s conception of the dialectical
interaction of party and class. . . . [Trotzky wrote that] the Marxist theoretician must still
retain the concrete historical perspective of class struggle:

“[The causes for the downfall of the Social Democracy and of official Communism must
be sought not in Marxist theory and not in the bad qualities of those people who applied
it, but in the concrete conditions of the historical process.] It is not a question of
counterposing abstract principles, but rather of the struggle of living social forces, with
1923 trajectories were critiqued by the Frankfurt School writers.¹⁹ As Adorno put it in *Negative Dialectics* (1966),

First Karl Korsch, later the functionaries of Diamat [Dialectical Materialism] have objected, that the turn to nonidentity would be, due to its immanent-critical and theoretical character, an insignificant nuance of neo-Hegelianism or of the historically obsolete Hegelian Left; as if the Marxist critique of philosophy had dispensed with this, while simultaneously the East cannot do without a statutory Marxist philosophy.

its inevitable ups and downs, with the degeneration of organizations, with the passing of entire generations into discard, and with the necessity which therefore arises of mobilizing fresh forces on a new historical stage. No one has bothered to pave in advance the road of revolutionary upsurge for the proletariat. [With inevitable halts and partial retreats it is necessary to move forward on a road crisscrossed by countless obstacles and covered with the debris of the past.] Those who are frightened by this had better step aside” [Trotsky, “To Build Communist Parties and an International Anew,” July 1933].

The Frankfurt School, while upholding a number of principles (which became “abstract” in their passivity and isolation), did indeed, in this sense, step aside. (68–70)

One is not without some justification in asking whether Council Communism could perhaps be a concrete embodiment of many of the principles of the Frankfurt School. . . . [But] the Council Communists did not point out the soviets’ [workers’ councils’] own responsibility for the collapse of the revolutionary wave of 1918–19. (73)

¹⁹. The reverse was also true. Korsch, in distancing himself from his 1923 work that was so seminal for the Frankfurt School writers, also came to critique them:

[Korsch] intended to try and interest Horkheimer and the [Frankfurt] Institute [for Social Research] in Pannekoek’s book *Lenin as Philosopher* (1938) [which traced the bureaucratization of the USSR back to the supposedly crude materialism of Lenin’s 1909 book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*]. . . . [Either] Korsch [or, the Director of the Institute, Horkheimer himself] would write a review for [the Institute’s journal] the *Zeitschrift*. . . . Yet no such review appeared. . . . [Korsch suffered] total disillusionment with the Institute and their “impotent philosophy.” Korsch [was] particularly bitter about the “metaphysician Horkheimer” (Slater, 73–74).

The record for Korsch’s deteriorating relations with the Frankfurt Institute in exile is found in his private letters to Paul Mattick, editor of the journal *Living Marxism: International Council Correspondence*. 

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The demand for the unity of theory and praxis has irresistibly debased the former to a mere underling; removing from it what it was supposed to have achieved in that unity. The practical visa-stamp demanded from all theory became the censor's stamp. In the famed unity of theory-praxis, the former was vanquished and the latter became non-conceptual, a piece of the politics which it was supposed to lead beyond; delivered over to power. The liquidation of theory by dogmatization and the ban on thinking contributed to bad praxis; that theory wins back its independence, is the interest of praxis itself. The relationship of both moments to each other is not settled for once and for all, but changes historically. Today, since the hegemonic bustle cripples and denigrates theory, theory testifies in all its powerlessness against the former by its mere existence.\(^{20}\)

In this passage Adorno was addressing, not the Korsch of the 1923 “Marxism and Philosophy,” but rather the later Korsch of the 1930 “Anti-Critique,” distanced from the problem Adorno sought to address, of the constitutive non-identity of theory and practice. Adorno thought, like Korsch and Lukács in the early 1920s, that Lenin and Luxemburg’s theoretical self-understanding, together with their revolutionary political practice, comprised the most advanced attempt yet to work through precisely this non-identity.\(^{21}\)

\(^{20}\) Translated by Dennis Redmond, 2001, at <http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>. The first sentence of this passage, mentioning Korsch, is inexplicably missing from the 1973 Continuum edition of *Negative Dialectics* translated by E. B. Ashton (see “Relation to Left-wing Hegelianism,” 143).

\(^{21}\) In a lecture of November 23, 1965, on “Theory and Practice,” Adorno said,
In Adorno’s terms, both the later Korsch and official “Diamat” (including Lukács) assumed “identity thinking,” an identity of effective theory and practice, rather than their articulated non-identity, to which Korsch had drawn attention earlier in “Marxism and Philosophy.” Such constitutive non-identity was, according to Korsch’s earlier essay, expressed symptomatically, in the subsistence of “philosophy” as a distinct activity in the historical epoch of Marxism. This was because it expressed a genuine historical need. The continued practice of philosophy was symptomatic expression of the need to transcend and supersede philosophy. Instead of this recognition of the actuality of the symptom of philosophical thinking, of the mutually constitutive separation of theory and practice, Korsch, by embracing council communism and shunning Marxist theory in the years after writing his famously condemned work, succumbed to what Adorno termed “identity thinking.” By assuming the identity of theory and practice, or of social being and consciousness in the workers’ movement, Korsch sought their “reconciliation,” instead of discerning and critically grasping their persistent antagonism, as would necessarily be articulated in any purported politics of emancipation.

I should like to say that there is no intention here of advocating a relapse into contemplation, as was found in the great idealist philosophies and ultimately even in Hegel, despite the great importance of practice in the Hegelian system. . . . The late Karl Korsch . . . criticized Horkheimer and myself even more sharply, already in America and also later on, after the publication of Dialectic of Enlightenment. His objection was that we had regressed to the standpoint of Left Hegelianism. This does not seem right to me because the standpoint of pure contemplation can no longer be sustained. Though we should note, incidentally, that the polarity Marx constructs between pure contemplation on the one hand and his own political philosophy on the other does only partial justice to the intentions of Left Hegelianism. This is a difficult question . . . although we cannot deny the impressive political instincts which alerted Marx to the presence of the retrograde and, above all, nationalist potential in such thinkers as Bruno Bauer, Stirner and Ruge. (Adorno, Lectures on Negative Dialectics [Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2008], 52–53.)
Just as Adorno tried to hold fast to the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* in the face of Lukács’s own subsequent disavowals, the first sentence of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* reiterated Korsch’s statement in “Marxism and Philosophy” that “Philosophy cannot be abolished without being realized” (97):

> Philosophy, which once seemed outmoded, remains alive because the moment of its realization was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world is itself crippled by resignation before reality, and becomes a defeatism of reason after the transformation of the world failed.  

Philosophy’s end was its *self*-abolition. What Korsch prefaced to his statement helps to illuminate what Adorno meant. Korsch specified precisely what “the realization of philosophy” involves:

> Just as political action is not rendered unnecessary by the economic action of a revolutionary class, so intellectual action is not rendered unnecessary by either political or economic action. On the contrary it must be carried through to the end in theory and practice, as revolutionary scientific criticism and agitational work before the seizure of state power by the working class, and as scientific organisation and ideological dictatorship after the seizure of state power. If this is valid for intellectual action

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against the forms of consciousness which define bourgeois society in general, it is especially true of philosophical action. Bourgeois consciousness necessarily sees itself as apart from the world and independent of it, as pure critical philosophy and impartial science, just as the bourgeois State and bourgeois Law appear to be above society. This consciousness must be philosophically fought by the revolutionary materialistic dialectic, which is the philosophy of the working class. This struggle will only end when the whole of existing society and its economic basis have been totally overthrown in practice, and this consciousness has been totally surpassed and abolished in theory. (97)

This was the original Marxist “defense” of philosophy that Adorno reiterated in Negative Dialectics. Over four decades previously, in 1923, Korsch had explicitly tied it to Lenin’s treatment of the problem of the state in The State and Revolution (1917). Just as, with the overcoming of capitalism, the necessity of the state would “wither,” and not be done away with at one stroke, so too the necessity of “philosophical” thinking as it appeared in the epoch of capital would dissolve. This side of emancipation, “theoretical” self-reflection, thought’s reflecting on its own conditions of possibility, remains necessary, precisely because it expresses an unresolved social-historical problem.

In “Marxism and Philosophy,” Korsch analyzed Marxism as emergent from and historically continuous with the “revolt of the Third Estate,” of the “bourgeois” liberal-democratic revolutionary epoch that preceded it. Korsch was concerned with Marx’s
continuity with Kant and Hegel. A problem that occurred to them, namely, of theory and practice, repeated itself, if in a more acute way, for Marx. It is a problem of the philosophy of revolution, or of the “theory of social revolution.” This problem presents itself only insofar as it is conceived of as part and parcel of the social-historical process of transformation and not as contemplation from without. As it was for Hegel, Marx’s fundamental “philosophical” issue is this: How is it possible, if however problematic, to be a self-conscious agent of change, if what is being transformed includes oneself, or, more precisely, an agency that transforms conditions both for one’s practical grounding and for one’s theoretical self-understanding in the process of acting?

Korsch addressed the question of revolution as a problem indicated by the liquidation and reconstitution of “philosophy” itself after the crisis and “decay of Hegelianism” (“Marxism and Philosophy,” 29). Why did philosophical development take a hiatus by 1848 and only appear to resume afterwards? What changed about “philosophy” in the interim? For Korsch recognized there was a curious blank spot or gap in the history of philosophy from the 1840s–60s, the period of Marxism’s emergence. Korsch divided the relation of Marx’s thought to philosophy roughly into three periods: pre-1848, circa 1848, and post-1848. These periods were distinguished by the different ways they related theory and practice: the first period was the critique of philosophy calling for its simultaneous realization and self-abolition; the second, the sublimation of

philosophy in revolution; and the third, the recrudescence of the problem of relating theory and practice.

Korsch’s third period in the history of Marxism extended into what he termed the “crisis of Marxism” beginning in the 1890s with the reformist “revisionist” dispute of Eduard Bernstein et al. against the “orthodox Marxism” of the 2nd International — when the “revolutionary Marxism” of Luxemburg and Lenin originated — and continuing into the acutely revolutionary period of 1917–19, from the Russian Revolution of 1917 through the German Revolution and civil war of 1918–19, to the Hungarian Soviet Republic (in which Lukács participated) and the workers’ council movement in Italy (in which Antonio Gramsci participated) in 1919.

It was in this revolutionary period of the early 20th century that “Marx’s Marxism” circa 1848 regained its saliency, but in ways that Korsch thought remained not entirely resolved as a matter of relating theory to practice. In “Marxism and Philosophy,” Korsch found that while Lenin and Luxemburg had tried to better relate Marxist theory and practice than 2nd International Marxism had done, they had recognized this as an ongoing task and aspiration and not already achieved in some finished sense. In the words of the epigraph from Lenin that introduces Korsch’s 1923 essay, “We must organize a systematic study of the Hegelian dialectic from a materialist standpoint” (“On the Significance of Militant Materialism,” 1922). If Marxism continued to be subject to a “Hegelian dialectic,” thus requiring the “historical materialist” analysis and explanation that Korsch sought to provide of it, this was because it was not itself the reconciled unity
of theory and practice but remained, as theory, the critical reflection on the problem of relating theory and practice — which in turn prompted further theoretical development as well as practical political advances. As Adorno put it to Walter Benjamin in a letter of August 2, 1935,

The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather it is dialectical, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness. . . . [P]erfection of the commodity character in a Hegelian self-consciousness inaugurates the explosion of its phantasmagoria.24

Marxism was caught in the “phantasmagoria” of capital, while “exploding” it from within.

For the Korsch of “Marxism and Philosophy,” Lenin and Luxemburg’s “revolutionary Marxism” was bound up in the “crisis of Marxism,” while advancing it to a new stage. As Korsch commented,

This transformation and development of Marxist theory has been effected under the peculiar ideological guise of a return to the pure teaching of original or true Marxism. Yet it is easy to understand both the reasons for this guise and the real character of the process which is concealed by it.

What theoreticians like Rosa Luxemburg in Germany and Lenin in Russia

have done, and are doing, in the field of Marxist theory is to liberate it from the inhibiting traditions of [Social Democracy]. They thereby answer the practical needs of the new revolutionary stage of proletarian class struggle, for these traditions weighed “like a nightmare” on the brain of the working masses whose objectively revolutionary socioeconomic position no longer corresponded to these [earlier] evolutionary doctrines.

The apparent revival of original Marxist theory in the Third International is simply a result of the fact that in a new revolutionary period not only the workers’ movement itself, but the theoretical conceptions of communists which express it, must assume an explicitly revolutionary form. This is why large sections of the Marxist system, which seemed virtually forgotten in the final decades of the nineteenth century, have now come to life again. It also explains why the leader of the Russian Revolution [Lenin] could write a book a few months before October [The State and Revolution, 1917] in which he stated that his aim was “in the first place to restore the correct Marxist theory of the State.” . . . When Lenin placed the same question theoretically on the agenda at a decisive moment, this was an early indication that the internal connection of theory and practice within revolutionary Marxism had been consciously re-established. (67–68)

Korsch thus established the importance for what Adorno called the “historically changing” relation of theory and practice, making sense of their vicissitudes in the history
of the politics of revolutionary Marxism. Furthermore, by establishing the character of the crisis of Marxism as a matter of theoretical reflection, Korsch re-established the role of consciousness in a Marxist conception of social revolution, why the abandonment or distancing of the practical perspective of revolution necessitates a degradation of theory.

Korsch and the 1960s “New Left” — the problem of “Leninism”

The translation and publication of Korsch’s “Marxism and Philosophy” in 1970 was an event for the Anglophone New Left. As Adolph Reed wrote,

Leninism’s elitism and denigration of consciousness had increasingly troubled me, but I feared I had no recourse without sacrificing a radical commitment. Korsch opened an entirely new vista, the “hidden dimension” of Western Marxism, and led to Lukács, a serious reading of Marcuse, and eventually the critical theoretical tradition.25

Reed’s brief comment is cryptic and can be taken in (at least) two opposed ways, either that Korsch provided the redemption of Lenin or an alternative to Leninism.

Such 1960s-era “New Left” ambivalence about “Leninism” can be found in attenuated form in Fred Halliday’s Translator’s Introduction. In it, Halliday sticks closely to a biographical narrative of Korsch’s work, seeking to bring out the coherence

25. Reed, “Paths to Critical Theory,” in Sohnya Sayres, Social Text Staff, eds., The 60s Without Apology (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 257–258. Reed’s essay was originally published in Social Text 9/10 (Spring–Summer 1984).
of Korsch’s early and later periods, before and after “Marxism and Philosophy,” while acknowledging the “erratic” character of Korsch’s thought over the course of his life, and calling Korsch’s tragic trajectory away from Lenin and Luxemburg’s revolutionary Marxism a “fatal consequence” of the failure of the revolution (26). By casting the issue of Korsch’s work as “interesting” (if “erratic”), Halliday remained somewhat equivocal about the relevance of Korsch’s key text, “Marxism and Philosophy,” and thus about the continued pertinence of the revolutionary Marxism that Lenin shared with Luxemburg. What remained unresolved?

Halliday also suggests that Korsch’s pre-1917 interests in the “syndicalist movement,” the “positive content and actively democratic aspects of socialism, by contrast with the orthodox Marxism of the 2nd International which he thought defined itself merely negatively as the abolition of the capitalist mode of production” (7–8), came to be expressed some years after the October Revolution, which witnessed “the decline in activity and the need for more critical reflection.” At that time, Korsch returned to his earlier concerns, but with the tragic consequence of “l lapsing into ultra-leftism and becoming cut off from the working class” (26).

Perhaps the motivation for Halliday’s 1970 translation and publication of Korsch’s “Marxism and Philosophy” was an affinity, after 1968, with Korsch’s moment of “critical reflection” circa 1923. It may have expressed Halliday’s hope that Korsch’s further trajectory and fate might be avoided by the 1960s “New Left.” In the wake of 1968, Halliday and others wanted to avoid the choice of either ultra-Leftism
(“Luxemburgism”) and “becoming cut off from the working class,” or official “Leninism,” and the 1923 Korsch seemed to provide a way out, through specific reflection on the problem of revolutionary political means and ends, in terms of articulating theory and practice.

Forgetting the theory-practice problem — Korsch on spontaneity vs. organization and 1848 vs. 1917

In his 1930 “Anti-Critique” of the 1923 “Marxism and Philosophy,” Korsch wrote,

When the SPD became a “Marxist” party (a process completed with the Erfurt Programme written by Kautsky and Bernstein in 1891) a gap developed between its highly articulated revolutionary “Marxist” theory and a practice that was far behind this revolutionary theory; in some respects it directly contradicted it. This gap was in fact obvious, and it later came to be felt more and more acutely by all the vital forces in the Party (whether on the Left or Right) and its existence was denied only by the orthodox Marxists of the Centre. This gap can easily be explained by the fact that in this historical phase “Marxism,” while formally accepted by the workers’ movement, was from the start not a true theory, in the sense of being “nothing other than a general expression of the real historical movement” (Marx). On the contrary it was always an ideology
that had been adopted “from outside” in a pre-established form. In this situation such “orthodox Marxists” as Kautsky and Lenin made a permanent virtue out of a temporary necessity. They energetically defended the idea that socialism can only be brought to the workers “from outside,” by bourgeois intellectuals who are allied to the workers’ movement. This was also true of Left radicals like Rosa Luxemburg.

(113–115)

According to Korsch, the Revolution of 1848 and the role of the workers’ movement in it had provided “a rational solution for all the mysteries” of the contradiction between theory and practice that later 2nd International Marxists tried to sidestep by simply adopting Marxism as an ideology. Korsch commented that,

[Although [2nd International Marxism’s] effective practice was now on a broader basis than before, it had in no way reached the heights of general and theoretical achievement earlier attained by the revolutionary movement and proletarian class struggle on a narrower basis. This height was attained during the final phase of the first major capitalist cycle that came to an end towards 1850. (116)

Since the mid-19th century, Marxism, according to the Korsch of the “Anti-Critique,” had grown ideological. Even Marx’s Capital expressed a certain degeneration:
[T]he theory of Marx and Engels was progressing towards an ever higher level of theoretical perfection although it was no longer directly related to the practice of the worker’s movement. (117)

In other words, the mature theory of Marx (and its development by Engels and their epigones) was itself “anachronistic” and thus unassimilable by the resurgent workers’ movement of the last third of the 19th century.

Korsch abandoned his 1923 conception of Lenin and Luxemburg’s rearticulation of 1848 in the theory and practice of 1917–19, the “transformation and development of Marxist theory . . . effected under the peculiar ideological guise of a return to the pure teaching of original or true Marxism.” Marx’s Marxism, especially in his mature writings, could only be the elaboration of 1848, in isolation from the workers’ subsequent actual political practice, to which it became ideologically blind and blinding. No adequate “theory,” that is, no “general expression of the real historical movement,” had emerged since. This non-identity and divergence of theory and practice that began in the period of Marx’s maturity and continued into the 20th century meant, for the Korsch of the 1930s, that Marxism, even in its most revolutionary forms, as with Lenin and Luxemburg, had developed, not to express, but rather to constrain the workers’ movement. Marxism had become an ideology whose value could only be relative, not qualitatively superior to others.²⁶ When he died in 1961, Korsch was working on a study

²⁶. Such eclecticism on the Left has only deepened and become more compounded since Korsch’s time, especially since the 1960s. However Marx may come up for periodic reconsideration, certain questions central to the Marxian problematic remain obscured. As Fredric Jameson has written,
of Marx’s rival in the 1st International Workingmen’s Association, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin.27

A Marx revival seems to be under way, predating the current [2007–09] disarray on Wall Street, even though no clear-cut political options yet seem to propose themselves. . . . The big ideological issues — anarchism, the party, economic planning, social classes — are still mainly avoided, on the grounds that they remind too many people of Communist propaganda. Such a reminder is unwanted, not so much because it is accompanied by the memory of deaths and violence . . . as simply and less dramatically because such topics now appear boring. (“Sandblasting Marx,” New Left Review 55 [January–February 2009].)

27. A. R. Giles-Peter, “Karl Korsch: A Marxist Friend of Anarchism,” Red & Black (Australia) 5 (April 1973). (Available on-line at: <http://www.geocities.com/capitolHill/Lobby/2379/korsh.htm>.) According to Giles-Peter, Korsch came to believe that the “basis of the revolutionary attitude in the modern bourgeois epoch would be an ethic Marx would have rejected as ‘anarchist’,” and thus “explicitly rejected the elements of Marxism which separate it from anarchism.”


Marx is today only one among the numerous precursors, founders and developers of the socialist movement of the working class. No less important are the so-called Utopian Socialists from Thomas More to the present. No less important are the great rivals of Marx, such as Blanqui, and his sworn enemies, such as Proudhon and Bakunin. No less important, in the final result, are the more recent developments such as German revisionism, French syndicalism, and Russian Bolshevism.

Whereas Korsch in 1923 had grasped the essential and vital if transformed continuity between Marx and his precursors in the “revolutionary movement of the Third Estate” of the bourgeois liberal-democratic revolutions, by 1950 he wrote:

The following points are particularly critical for Marxism: (a) its dependence on the underdeveloped economic and political conditions in Germany and all the other countries of central and eastern Europe where it was to have political relevance; (b) its unconditional adherence to the political forms of the bourgeois revolution; (c) the unconditional acceptance of the advanced economic conditions of England as a model for the future development of all countries and as objective preconditions for the transition to socialism; to which one should add; (d) the consequences of its repeated desperate and contradictory attempts to break out of these conditions.
4. Theory-practice

What made Korsch’s essay “Marxism and Philosophy” (1923) important, to Benjamin and Adorno’s work for instance, and what related it intrinsically to Lukács’s contemporaneous treatment of the question of the “Hegelian” dimension of Marxism in History and Class Consciousness, is Korsch’s discovery of the historically changing relation of theory and practice, and the self-consciousness of this problem, in the history of Marxism. This meant that the matter was, from a Marxist perspective, as Adorno put it in Negative Dialectics, “not settled once and for all, but fluctuates historically.” Indeed, as Adorno put it in a late essay,

If, to make an exception for once, one risks what is called a grand perspective, beyond the historical differences in which the concepts of theory and praxis have their life, one discovers the infinitely progressive aspect of the separation of theory and praxis, which was deplored by the Romantics and denounced by the Socialists in their wake — except for the mature Marx.


29. Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” in Critical Models, trans. by Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 266. This essay, a “dialectical epilegomenon” to his book Negative Dialectics that Adorno said intended to bring together “philosophical speculation and drastic experience” (Critical Models, 126) was one of the last writings he finished for publication before he died in 1969. It reflected his dispute with fellow Frankfurt School Critical Theorist Hebert Marcuse over the student protests of the Vietnam War (see Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence on the German Student Movement,” trans. by Esther Leslie, New Left Review I/233, Jan.–Feb. 1999, 123–136). As Adorno put it in his May 5, 1969 letter to Marcuse,

[T]here are moments in which theory is pushed on further by practice. But such a situation neither exists objectively today, nor does the barren and brutal practicism that
However one may wish to question the nuances Korsch’s specific historiographic periodization of the problem of Marxism as that of the relation of theory and practice, both during Marx’s lifetime and after, this should not be with an eye to either disputing or defending Marx or a Marxist approach’s consistency on the matter. One may perhaps attempt a more fine-grained approach to the historical “fluctuations” of what Adorno called the “constitutive” and indeed “progressive” aspect of the “separation of theory and praxis.” Korsch’s point in the 1923 “Marxism and Philosophy,” followed by Benjamin and Adorno, was that one must attend to this “separation,” or, as Adorno put it, “non-identity,” if one is to have a properly Marxist self-consciousness of the problem of “Marxism” in theory and practice. For this problem of the separation of theory and practice is not to be deplored, but calls for critical awareness. Marx was consistent, in his own awareness of the relation of theory and practice. This meant that at different times Marx found them related in different ways.

By contrast, what waylaid “Marxism” was the freezing of the theory-practice problem, which then continued to elude a progressive-emancipatory solution at any given moment. Particular historical moments in the theory-practice problem became hypostatized and dogmatized. So generations of ostensible “Marxists” failed to heed, for instance, the nature of Rosa Luxemburg’s praise of Lenin and Trotsky’s Bolsheviks in the October Revolution:

confronts us here have the slightest thing to do with theory anyhow. (“Correspondence,” 127.)
All of us are subject to the laws of history. . . . The Bolsheviks have shown that they are capable of everything that a genuine revolutionary party can contribute within the limits of historical possibilities. . . . What is in order is to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, the kernel from the accidental excrescencies in the politics of the Bolsheviks. In the present period, when we face decisive final struggles in all the world, the most important problem of socialism was and is the burning question of our time. It is not a matter of this or that secondary question of tactics, but of the capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. In this, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the first, those who went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world; they are still the only ones up to now who can cry with Hutten: “I have dared!” This is the essential and enduring in Bolshevik policy. In this sense theirs is the immortal historical service of having marched at the head of the international proletariat with the conquest of political power and the practical placing of the problem of the realization of socialism, and of having advanced mightily the settlement of the score between capital and labor in the entire world. . . . And in this sense, the future everywhere belongs to “Bolshevism.”

The Bolshevik Revolution was not itself the achievement of socialism and the
overcoming of capitalism, but it did nevertheless squarely address itself to the problem of
grasping history so as to make possible revolutionary practice. The Bolsheviks
recognized, in other words, that one is tasked, by the very nature of capital, in Marx’s
sense, to struggle within and through the separation of theory and practice. This is why
the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 was the occasion and context for Korsch’s

The . . . items in [Luxemburg’s] The Russian Revolution [that] dealt with Bolshevik
policy with regard to the Constituent Assembly and suffrage . . . criticized the
Bolsheviks’ action in dispersing the Constituent Assembly, which they themselves had
called, and in restricting the suffrage. The details were not important, and these — but
only these — she later retracted . . . She was wrong in supposing that a kind of mass
pressure on a Constituent Assembly in Russia, moving it forward and keeping it Socialist,
was available; quite the contrary. (700–701) . . .

Rosa Luxemburg’s pamphlet on the Russian Revolution has become famous as
an almost clairvoyant indictment of the Bolsheviks. In part this is justified. But its
purpose will be better served if we see it as an analysis of ideal revolution based, like so
much of Rosa Luxemburg’s work, on a form of critical dialogue, in this base with the
Bolshevik October Revolution. Those who are made joyful by criticism of the
fundamentals of the Bolshevik revolution would do better to turn elsewhere. (704–705)

They search of Rosa’s writings for specific approval or disapproval of the
Russian example . . . is based on a misunderstanding of her attitude and her situation. . . .
[Luxemburg wrote:] “If our party is full of enthusiasm for Bolshevism . . . then it is no
more than enthusiasm coupled with the spirit of criticism — what more can people want
from us?” (716) . . .

Possibly the only factual error to which [Luxemburg] ever admitted was her
support for a Constituent Assembly in Russia at the beginning of 1918. For the rest, she
had always insisted that the problem of terror and the suppression of democracy were
phenomena of isolation, and a world-wide, or at least European, revolution would do
away with them. But they were no less reprehensible for being temporary.

In any case, all the evidence shows that she was willing and anxious to
collaborate with the Russians, to learn from their experience, and to agitate as strongly as
possible for a link between revolutionary Russia and revolutionary Germany. . . . But this
did not imply any admission of Russian precedence, or the subordination of German
tactics to the dictates of Moscow. . . . [T]his problem simply did not exist. Lenin and the
Bolsheviks were willing to admit, if not the primacy of the German revolution over the
Russian — though there is some evidence of this — at least the critical importance to the
Soviet Union of Communist success in Germany. The Bolsheviks were prepared to make
real sacrifices for this. . . . Rosa was the last to prefer abstract criticisms of other people’s
activities [which] was [Karl] Kautsky’s specialty. (718–719)
rumination on the theory and practice of Marxism and the Hegelian roots of its self-consciousness in his seminal 1923 essay on “Marxism and Philosophy.”

In the extended aftermath of the failed revolution of 1917–19, the crisis of the Stalinization of Third International Communism and the looming political victory of fascism, Horkheimer, in an aphorism titled “A Discussion About Revolution,” addressed himself to the same subject Luxemburg and Korsch had discussed, from the other side of historical experience:

[A] proletarian party cannot be made the object of contemplative criticism. . . . Bourgeois criticism of the proletarian struggle is a logical impossibility. . . . At times such as the present, revolutionary belief may not really be compatible with great clear-sightedness about the realities.³¹

This is because, for Horkheimer, from a Marxist “proletarian” perspective, as opposed to a (historically) “bourgeois” one (including that of pre- or non-Marxist “socialism”), the problem is not a matter of formulating a correct theory and then implementing it in practice. It is rather a question of what Lukács called “historical consciousness.” We should note well how Horkheimer posed the theory-practice problem here, as the contradiction between “revolutionary belief” and “clear-sightedness about the realities.”

Horkheimer elaborated further that proletarian revolutionary politics cannot be conceived on the model of capitalist enterprise, and not only for socioeconomic class-hierarchical reasons, but rather because of the differing relation of theory and practice in

the two instances; it is the absence of any “historical consciousness” of the theory and practice problem that makes “bourgeois criticism of the proletarian struggle” a logical “impossibility.” As Lukács put it, in “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” (1923), “a radical change in outlook is not feasible on the soil of bourgeois society.” Rather, one must radically deepen — render “dialectical” — the outlook of the present historical moment. The point is that a Marxist perspective can find — and indeed has often found — itself far removed from the practical politics and (entirely “bourgeois”) ideological consciousness of the working class. This has not invalidated Marxism, but rather called for a further Marxist critical reflection on its own condition.

In a letter of February 22, 1881 to the Dutch anarchist Ferdinand Domela-Nieuwenhuis, Marx wrote:

> It is my conviction that the critical juncture for a new International Working Men’s Association has not yet arrived and for that reason I regard all workers’ congresses or socialist congresses, in so far as they are not directly related to the conditions existing in this or that particular nation, as not merely useless but actually harmful. They will always ineffectually end in endlessly repeated general banalities.32

Marx recognized no fixed relation of theory and practice that he pursued throughout his career. Instead, he very self-consciously exercised judgment respecting the changing

relation of theory and practice, and considered this consciousness the hallmark of his politics. Marx’s *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) excoriated “bourgeois” democratic politics, including that of contemporary socialists, for its inability to simultaneously learn from *history* and face the challenge of the *new*.\(^{33}\) How else could one judge that a moment has “not yet arrived” while calling for something other than “endlessly repeated banalities?”

Marx had a critical theory of the relation of theory and practice — recognizing it as a historically specific and not merely “philosophical” problem, or, a problem that called for the *critical theory of the philosophy of history* — and a political practice of the relation of theory and practice. There is not simply a theoretical or practical problem, but also and more profoundly a problem of relating theory and practice.

From this perspective, it is not possible to think out ahead of time nor work through in the process of acting. There is no need to dissolve the theory-practice

\(^{33}\) As Luxemburg put it in 1915 in *The Crisis of German Social Democracy* (AKA, *The Junius Pamphlet*, available on-line at: http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/ch01.htm), Marx says [in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)]: “[T]he democrat (that is, the petty bourgeois revolutionary) [comes] out of the most shameful defeats as unmarked as he naively went into them; he comes away with the newly gained conviction that he must be victorious, not that he or his party ought to give up the old principles, but that conditions ought to accommodate him.” The modern proletariat comes out of historical tests differently. Its tasks and its errors are both gigantic: no prescription, no schema valid for every case, no infallible leader to show it the path to follow. Historical experience is its only school mistress. Its thorny way to self-emancipation is paved not only with immeasurable suffering but also with countless errors. The aim of its journey — its emancipation depends on this — is whether the proletariat can learn from its own errors. Self-criticism, remorseless, cruel, and going to the core of things is the life’s breadth and light of the proletarian movement. The fall of the socialist proletariat in the present world war [WWI] is unprecedented. It is a misfortune for humanity. But socialism will be lost only if the international proletariat fails to measure the depth of this fall, if it refuses to learn from it.
distinction, but rather achieve both good theory and good practice in the struggle to relate them properly. It is not a matter of finding either a correct theory or correct practice, but of trying to judge and affect their changing relation and recognizing this as a problem of history.

Marx overcame the political pitfalls and historical blindness of his “revolutionary” contemporaries, such as the pre-Marxian socialism of Proudhon et al. leading to 1848, anarchism in the 1st International, and the Lassallean trend of the German Social-Democratic Party. It is significant that Marx’s Critique of the Gotha Program (1875) critiqued the residual Lassallean politics of the Social Democrats for being to the Right of the liberals on international free trade, etc., thus exposing the problem of this first “Marxist” party from the outset.34

If Marx’s own thought was born in the crisis of the 1840s (the “hungry ’40s”), then Marx-ism (as distinct from Marx’s own thought and practice), as a form of politics sui generis, a Marxist politics per se, dates from the collapse of the First International (International Workingmen’s Association) and the formation of the German Social Democratic Workers’ Party (SPD) in the 1870s. As such, Marxism is contemporaneous with the first Great Depression that began with the crisis of 1873. Marxism, as a form of


In fact, the internationalism of the program stands even infinitely below that of the Free Trade party. The latter also asserts that the result of its efforts will be “the international brotherhood of peoples.” But it also does something to make trade international. . . . The international activity of the working classes does not in any way depend on the existence of the International Working Men’s Association.
politics distinct from other forms of socialism, dates from this period. Prior to this, there was no question of “Marxism” but, rather, Marx and Engels and their close colleagues participated in the broader socialist movement.

The global crisis of 1873 was the end of the mid-19th century “liberal” era (which saw a certain heyday in the 1860s, also when Leftist politics emerged from post-1848 reaction). In Marxist historiographical terms, the period after 1873 dates the emergence of the “monopoly” era of capitalism, the era of modern “imperialism.” By contrast, the 1860s is the decade, for instance, marked by the U.S. Civil War, which conditioned the formation of the First International.35 However, that period ended by the 1870s.

Significantly, 1873 was a blow to, and not a boon for, the First International. If we take the First International as paradigmatic of 19th century socialism, the crisis of 1873 did not boost 19th century socialism as much as it was coincidental historically with the crisis of 19th century socialism, namely, the collapse of the First International. The 1870s signaled a shift. This shift, towards what became “Marxism,” therefore, was bound up with other changes. These changes can be summed up in the historical shift from the liberal era to the state-centric era of capitalism.

“State capitalism” is a tricky category, with a variety of different meanings. For instance, Friedrich Pollock, a member of the Frankfurt School, wrote an influential essay on “state capitalism,” published in the early 1940s, which referred to changes in the inter-war years of the early 20th century. But, in another sense, “state capitalism” can be dated

in two very different ways: from 1873 or 1914, either Bismarck or WWI. The fact that state capitalism can be characterized as having such very different start dates is significant: it places, specifically, the period between these two dates under certain questions. This period, 1873–1914, is coterminal with another historiographic period, the time between the Franco-Prussian War and WWI (in France, this is the period of the Third Republic, after the collapse of the Louis Bonaparte’s Second Empire and the suppression of the Paris Commune), which developed towards a certain flowering of global capitalism in the Belle Époque. This is also the period of Marxism. Thus, it is significant that Marxism, in its “classical” era, can be considered a phenomenon of the turn to state capitalism. Marxists of this period called this era “imperialism,” or the “highest stage of capitalism,” the eve of socialist revolution. In other words, the period of the emergence of Marxism as a politics _sui generis_ was also understood by Marxists of the time as sharing the historical moment of capitalism’s highest possible stage. “State capitalism,” in this view, was not the overcoming but rather the exacerbation of the contradictions of capitalism. Marxism was thus bound up with heightening contradiction.

The late-19th to early-20th century period of “imperialism” resulted in the First World War, which was, of course, the crisis of Marxism: the collapse of the Second International. The question is how Marxism was bound up with the imperialist phase of capitalism, and how the crisis of Marxism in WWI was connected to the other results of this period of history. In other words, how did the crisis of Marxism itself share in the
historical moment of the emergence and crisis of state capitalism, understood by Marxists at the time as “imperialism”? 

For the Marxists of this time, WWI was the crisis of capitalism in its period of “revolution,” which was signaled, in an inaugural sense, by the Russian Revolution of 1905. Marxists such as Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky regarded this period as one confronted by the choice of “socialism or barbarism,” or, more specifically, the “civil war” of the workers against the capitalists or a “world war” between imperialist states. This was the prognosis.

Both predictions, of civil war and world war, in fact, came spectacularly true. Up to that time, Marxists understood this as either one alternative or the other. As it turned out, it was both. There was a world war and a civil war in 1914–19, in which the Second International collapsed and Marxism was divided. Marxism was divided specifically on the questions of both the imperialist world war and the class-struggle civil war that followed. So the crisis of Marxism was not only over the world war but was also over the civil war.

Marxism, specifically as a form of politics *sui generis* (distinguished from the greater 19th century history of socialism, from the Utopians to Proudhon, Blanqui, Lassalle, Bakunin, et al.) that had developed in the preceding period, from 1875–1914, did not survive its crisis in WWI and the revolutions that followed. Rather, in certain key respects, Marxism died then.
The failure of Marxism can be seen most clearly in the birth of a new right-wing form of politics, fascism, in this period, issuing directly out of the crisis of Marxism in WWI (see, for instance, Benito Mussolini, who before the war was a leading member of the Marxist Left of the Italian Socialist Party). Wilhelm Reich, among others, laid the blame for fascism directly at the door of Marxism as a failed political project (see “Ideology as Material Power,” in The Mass Psychology of Fascism, 1933/46). Fascism, 20th century social-democratic reformism, 20th century forms of nationalism (i.e., “anti-colonialism”), and Stalinism were the predominant (but not exclusive) results of the failed crisis of Marxism 1914–19.

Such emphasis on the post-1873 historical specificity of Marxism raises the issue of Marxism per se. Not the question of the workers’ movement or of socialism, but of Marxism. This is not posed later, in 1933 (the failure of Communist International to stop Nazism), or 1923 (the definitive end of the post-WWI revolutionary wave) or 1919 (the crushing of the German Revolution) or 1917 (the October Revolution as revolutionary split in Marxism) or 1914 (the collapse of the Second International in WWI). The question of Marxism is posed already at the outset in the 1870s. Why was the SPD necessary? Why does the SPD take the form it does? Why did Marxists join a Lassallean party? 36

So, there is the issue of the SPD, founded in 1875. Wasn’t it always a Lassallean state-capitalist party with “Marxist” window-dressing? The question is, is there such a thing as a “Marxist party?” Or, is there, rather, a socialist party with Marxists

36 See Peter Hudis, Marx’s Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism (Boston: Brill, 2012), 89.
participating in it? Marxism was the “historical consciousness” of the socialist workers’ movement. There is a famous photograph of Rosa Luxemburg, flanked on stage by portraits of Lassalle and Marx. Now, what did that mean? Certainly, Luxemburg was aware of Marx’s critique of and political opposition to Lassalle. So, what did it mean for an avowed “Marxist” such as Luxemburg to participate in a socialist workers’ movement and political party with such a strong, avowed tradition of Lassalleanism?

But the history of Marxism was always characterized by the critique of socialism, starting with Marx in the 1840s, but carried forward, for instance, in Lenin’s critique, in *What is to be done?* and elsewhere, of Narodnism, “Legal Marxism,” and “Economism.” Or, more generally, in the Marxist critique of anarchism, whether of Proudhon or Bakunin, et al. There is also the “Revisionist Dispute” within Marxism itself in the 1890s. What would it mean, then, to speak of Marxism as a form of politics *per se*?

Just as Marxism as a philosophy or theory is peculiar, as a political practice it is also quite peculiar. If, for Marxists, the workers’ movement for socialism always shaded off into liberalism and anarchism (see, for example, Luxemburg’s treatment of this, in *Reform or Revolution*), is always overlaid with anarchist and liberal ideology, then Marxism is always in a constant struggle against these. But this is not a struggle merely of opposition but of critical *recognition*.37

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37 There is, for instance, the issue that Marx himself was accused, by Lassalle in the 1860s or later by Bakunin, of being right-wing or opportunistic, in his endorsement of unions and workers’ consumer cooperatives, etc. Lukács points this out (in “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness*, 1923), that is, the symptomatic character of Lassalle’s criticism of Marx for supposedly being “economic” and neglecting politics. But Lassalle criticized the “economic” struggles of the workers more generally, going so far as to call this the mere struggle of economic “objects” as objects (of capitalism). But Lukács’s point was that Marx recognized a dialectic of economics and
Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky, following Marx, thus recovered and struggled through the problem of theory and practice for their time, precipitating a crisis in Marxism, and advancing it. They overcame the “vulgar Marxist” ossification of theory and practice in the 2nd International, in Korsch and Lukács explanation. This meant the Marxist critique of Marxism, or, an emancipatory critique of emancipatory politics — a Left critique of the Left. This was not a finished task.

**Marxist Hegelianism**

Rosa Luxemburg’s biographer J.P. Nettl’s article on “The German Social-Democratic Party 1890–1914 as Political Model” (*Past and Present* 30, April 1965) argued that Luxemburg’s views, as expressed in *Reform or Revolution?* and *The Mass Strike*, among other writings, were not “actionist” but rather concerned with the transformation of the SPD in which the Marxist Left had a stake. For Nettl, the history of Marxism raised questions about the possibilities for politics *per se*. Luxemburg and Lenin were not opposed to the formation of workers’ political parties as necessary instruments of emancipation, but they were aware of the dangers inherent in this, from a Marxist perspective on the historical development of capital, in which such workers’ organizations (including labor unions) were inevitably bound up. In other words, how, e.g., the SPD was a phenomenon of the history of capital, or, more precisely, how the politics, or, of the workers as both “objects” and “subjects” of capitalism. Marx didn’t take unions or cooperatives as good in themselves, but rather as historical (and symptomatic) forms that the workers’ movement was taking, to be pushed through. They are the forms through which the possibility for socialism can be grasped. They can’t be accepted in their own terms, but they’re also not to be criticized, let alone rejected as such.
workers’ movement for socialism was part of the historical development of capital, and did not somehow oppose it from outside. In this sense, there was an affinity of Eduard Bernstein’s views on “evolutionary socialism” with Luxemburg’s, but they drew the opposite political conclusions: where Bernstein found the transformation of capital through reforms to be ameliorative, Luxemburg found a deepening crisis. This was Luxemburg’s thesis in Reform or Revolution?, that only reformists separated social reform from political revolution, because Marxism recognized that reforms deepened the crisis of capital and made revolution not less but more necessary.

Benjamin and Adorno, like Lukács and Korsch (from whom they took direct inspiration), followed Luxemburg and Lenin’s judgments about the crisis of Marxism as the crisis of bourgeois society that Marxism itself, as part of the ideology and practical political leadership of the international social-democratic workers’ movement, had brought about. Benjamin and Adorno challenged the linear-progressive conception of history, recovering from the history of Marxism what might appear to be an obscure point, but one addressed, for example, by Plekhanov as history moving in a “knotted line,” and by Lenin as history moving in “spirals” of repetition and crisis (see Lenin’s 1915 Granat Encyclopedia entry on “Karl Marx”). This Hegelian-Marxist approach to the dialectics of history was digested usefully by Lukács, as a discussion of historical “moment” and “process” in “Tailism and the Dialectic” (Lukács’s unpublished 1925 defense of History and Class Consciousness).
The Hegelian — and Kantian — point is that the relation between theory and practice is not one of empirical deduction from trial and error in which an always imperfect theory is corrected, but “inductive,” in that the concrete “material” object of practice is the concretization of abstractions, and, furthermore, the object of practice is indeed first and foremost the subject, i.e., the “subject-object” of transformation. The question is the adequacy of the relation of theory and practice. Metaphysical (“theoretical”) categories refer not to a world extrinsic to subjectivity, but to the world constituted socially in and through such categories, which are always eminently practical as well as theoretical. So, in the most pertinent example, the “commodity form” is, for Marxists, a category of social relations, which gives it an effective social reality, different from physical nature. The commodity form is not a generalization from experience, but rather informs that experience. This is the way in which the Kantian revolution in philosophy was followed by Hegel, Marx, Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno.

The issue of Hegelianism is undoubtedly a difficult one: how to include the “subjective factor in history.” This ultimately turns on how one understands Marx’s critique of Hegel. Marx’s reference to the “real” is not in an empiricist sense, but rather in Hegel’s sense of the actuality of the rational in the real. The issue turns on the relation of essence and appearance, or, with what necessity things appear as they do. For Kant and those who followed, what is essential is what is practical, and what is practical is subjective as well as objective. Theoretical reflection on the subjective must use
metaphysical categories that are not merely handy but actually constitutive of social practices in which one is a subject.

How this matters for the philosophy of history is that history is not a compendium of past facts but a *social relation* of the “present” with itself. The past is not “past” but present, and present “historically.” So, for Benjamin and Adorno (following Lukács and Korsch, who followed Lenin, Luxemburg, and Marx and Engels on this point), the question was how to reckon the history of Marxism and the greater socialist workers’ movement as *symptomatic expression* of the history of capital, or, how the “proletariat” was and could become the transformed “subject-object of history.” Lukács’s term for the self-alienated character of this “subject-object” condition of the working class in capital was “reification.” “Reification” referred not to the workers’ quotidian consciousness in capitalism, but to the “class consciousness” of the workers, as expressed by Social Democracy (and “Marxism”) at its height. For Lukács and those who followed, “reification” meant Kautsky.

Nettl described how Kautsky attempted “to invest certain observed phenomena with the normative sanction of Marxist theory.” Nettl cited Parvus against Kautsky: “All the guts knocked out of [Marxism]. Out of Marx’s good raw dough Kautsky made *Matzes*” (82). Kautsky abused theory, making it serve as justification or rationalization — as many “Marxists” of the 20th century did — rather than as a provocation to the self-reflection of consciousness, in the Hegelian sense.
While it may appear tempting to oppose such apparent static/immobilized (or “contemplative”) consciousness with action(ism), Lukács, following Luxemburg and Lenin, posed the opposition of static and dynamic was an antinomy of capital itself, that capital moved through a dialectic of the antinomy of the dynamic and the static in history. This is where the recovery of the Hegelian dimension of Marxism was critical: Marxism itself had become “vulgarized” in its self-understanding, and had failed in taking a dialectical approach to itself as a historical phenomenon, as a symptom of the history of capital. Marxism had succumbed to the “bourgeois” (pre-Kantian) view of (linear) progress through trial-and-error, the asymptotic view of knowledge, in which, as Benjamin put it, mordantly citing, in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Dietzgen as pathological example of Social Democratic progressivism, “Every day our cause becomes clearer and people get smarter.” For Benjamin and Adorno, history had proved otherwise.

What this meant to Benjamin and Adorno, following Lukács’s view on “reification,” was that Marxism had failed to address “dialectically” the transformation of capital. In this view, the workers’ movement for socialism is itself the most important “self-contradictory” and self-alienated phenomenon of the history of capital. This is why Marx had begun (in 1843–44) with the critique of socialism, or, why the “critique of political economy” is the critique of the necessary and symptomatic consciousness of the socialist workers’ movement.
Marx had tried to achieve the “Hegelian” self-consciousness of his own historical moment. The question is, what relevance has Marx’s Hegelianism in the high period of Marxism and subsequently, and what is the relevance of taking such a Hegelian approach to the history of Marxism subsequent to Marx?

Lukács’s “subject” of history was not the point of view or relative perspective of the proletariat as the revolutionary agent that must assert its “will”. Rather, Lukács followed both Lenin and Luxemburg (and Marx) in that the workers’ movement for socialism was regarded as the necessary mediation for grasping the problem of capital in its “totality”, that the workers must not remake the world in their image, but rather lead society more generally beyond the contradiction of capital. Hence, as characterized by the approach of the Kautskyan “center” of the Second International, the socialist workers’ movement was regarded as the leading, practical force in democratic struggles beyond the workers’ own (sectional) interests in the transformation of society as a whole.

Lenin didn’t make a virtue of necessity in the Russian Revolution after October 1917 and adopt a voluntarist (and substitutionalist) conception of the working class and the political party of communism. Rather, Lenin consistently criticized and politically fought against those tendencies of Bolshevism and in the early Third International (for instance, in “Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder (1920). It was not that what appears to be Lenin’s newfound “Hegelianism” after 1914 (e.g., see his notebooks on Hegel’s Science of Logic) was the means by which he achieved some mistaken rapprochement with the ultra-Left of the 2nd Intl. against the Kautskyan “center.” Lenin
was not opportunistic but consistent in navigating the historically fluctuating relations of theory and practice.

The key for grasping this is Luxemburg and the perspective she shared in common with Lenin. Luxemburg was not a semi-syndicalist spontaneist/voluntarist, nor did she neglect issues of political mediation: she was not an “ultra-Leftist.” Rather, her pamphlet, *The mass strike, the political party, and the trade unions* (1906), had an entirely different political purpose and conclusion. It was not an argument in favor of the mass strike as a tactic, let alone strategy, but rather an analysis of the significance of the mass strike in the 1905 Russian Revolution as a historical phenomenon, inextricably bound up in the development of capital at a global scale, and how this tasked and challenged the social democratic workers’ movement (the Second International and the SPD in particular) to reformulate its approach and transform itself under such changed historical conditions, specifically with regard to the relation of the party to the unions.

Luxemburg’s perspective was neither anarcho-syndicalist/spontaneist nor vanguardist, but rather dialectical. The mass strike was not a timeless principle. For Luxemburg, 1905 showed that the world had moved into an era of revolutionary struggle that demanded changes in the workers’ movement for socialism. A contradiction had developed between the social democratic party and (its own associated) labor unions, or Social Democracy had become a self-contradictory phenomenon in need of transformation.
Furthermore, Lenin’s critiques of Kautsky for being “non-dialectical” that were followed by Lukács, Korsch and Adorno were very specific. This was not a critique of Kautsky “philosophically” (although it does speak to his bad practices as a theorist), but politically. It is about Kautsky’s non-dialectical approach to politics: that is, the relation of theory and practice, or of social being and consciousness, in and through the concrete mediations of the historically constituted workers’ movement. Kautsky failed in this. Lenin agreed with Luxemburg in her *Junius pamphlet* (1915) that the problem was Kautsky thinking that the SPD’s Marxism (that is, what became Kautsky’s USPD) could “hide like a rabbit” during World War I and resume the struggle for socialism afterward. Or, as Lenin put it in his *Imperialism: the highest stage of capitalism* (1916) and *Socialism and war* (1915), contra Kautsky’s theory of “ultra-imperialism,” the world war must be regarded as a necessary and not accidental outcome of the historical development of capitalism, and so a crisis that was an opportunity for revolutionary transformation, and not merely, as Kautsky thought, a derailment into barbarism to be resisted. This was the essential basis for agreement between Luxemburg and Lenin 1914–19.

These central figures allow for grasping the history of Marxism. For Lukács and Korsch, this was not about learning from their trials and errors, but rather from the example of their “consciousness,” not merely theoretically, but practically. Moreover, the history of Marxism was to be approached as part and parcel, and the highest expression, of the history of post-1848 capital.
Rosa Luxemburg, in her speech to the founding congress of the German Communist Party (Spartacus League), “On the Spartacus programme” (1918), offered a remarkable argument about the complex, recursive historical dialectic of progression and regression issuing from 1848. Here, Luxemburg stated that,

Great historical movements have been the determining causes of today’s deliberations. The time has arrived when the entire socialist programme of the proletariat has to be established upon a new foundation. We are faced with a position similar to that which was faced by Marx and Engels when they wrote the Communist Manifesto seventy years ago. . . . With a few trifling variations, [the formulations of the Manifesto] . . . are the tasks that confront us today. It is by such measures that we shall have to realize socialism. Between the day when the above programme [of the Manifesto] was formulated, and the present hour, there have intervened seventy years of capitalist development, and the historical evolutionary process has brought us back to the standpoint [of Marx and Engels in the Manifesto]. . . . The further evolution of capital has . . . resulted in this, that . . . it is our immediate objective to fulfill what Marx and Engels thought they would have to fulfill in the year 1848. But between that point of development, that beginning in the year 1848, and our own views and our
immediate task, there lies the whole evolution, not only of capitalism, but
in addition that of the socialist labor movement. 38

This is because, as Luxemburg had put it in her 1900 pamphlet Reform or Revolution, the
original contradiction of capital, the chaos of production versus its progressive
socialization, had become compounded by a new “contradiction,” the growth in
organization and consciousness of the workers’ movement itself, which in Luxemburg’s
view did not ameliorate but exacerbated the social and political crisis and need for
revolution in capital. By contrast, however, see Kautsky’s criticism of Lenin and
Luxemburg, for their predilection for what Kautsky called “primitive Marxism.” Kautsky
wrote that, “All theoreticians of communism delight in drawing on primitive Marxism, on
the early works, which Marx and Engels wrote before they turned thirty, up until the
revolution of 1848 and its aftermath of 1849 and 1850.”39 Prior to World War I, Kautsky
would have regarded socialism as more possible than in Marx’s time. After World War I,
however, Kautsky regarded it as less so, and with less necessity of priority. Rather,
“democracy” seemed to Kautsky more necessary than, and a precondition for the
possibility of socialism. But for Lenin socialism was a precondition for true democracy.

For Lenin, as for Luxemburg, the preconditions of socialism had also been eroded
and not merely further developed since Marx’s time. Indeed Kautsky, Lenin’s great
Marxist adversary in 1917, regarded WWI as a setback and not as an opportunity to

38 Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/12/30.htm>
39 This is in Kautsky’s critique of Karl Korsch’s rumination on Luxemburg and Lenin in “Marxism and
(February 2012), available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2012/01/30/destroyer-of-vulgar-marxism/>.
struggle for socialism. Lenin’s opponents considered him fanatical. The attempt to turn the World War into a civil war — socialist revolution — seemed dogmatic zealotry. For Kautsky, Lenin’s revolutionism seemed part of the barbarism of the War rather than an answer to it. For Lenin, World War I may have made socialism in certain respects apparently less possible, but it also made it more necessary. This is the dialectical conception of “socialism or barbarism” that Lenin shared with Rosa Luxemburg, and what made them common opponents of Kautsky. Luxemburg and Lenin regarded themselves as “orthodox,” faithful to the revolutionary spirit of Marx and Engels, whereas Kautsky was a traitor — “renegade.” Kautsky opposed democracy to socialism but betrayed them both.

Following Lenin and Luxemburg, Korsch and Lukács’s “Hegelian” point was that “subjective” struggles for transformation take place in and through “necessary forms of appearance” that misrecognize their “objective” social realities, not in terms of imperfect approximations or more or less true generalized abstractions, but specifically as a function of the “alienated” and “reified” social and political dynamics of capital. Capital is “objective” in a specific way, and so poses historically specific problems for subjectivity.

The reason for Marxists distinguishing their approach from Hegel was precisely historical: that a change in society took place between Hegel’s and Marx’s time that causes Hegelian categories, as those of an earlier, pre-Industrial Revolution era of bourgeois society, to become inverted in truth, or reversed in intention. Marx’s idea was
that the “contradiction” of bourgeois society had changed. Thus the dialectical “law of
motion” was specific to the problem of capital and not a transhistorical principle of
(social) action and thought. Marx’s society was not Hegel’s. The meaning of Hegel had
changed, just as the meaning of the categories of bourgeois society had changed. Labor-
time as value had become not productive (if not unproblematically) — as in Hegel’s and
Adam Smith’s time, the era of “manufacture” — but destructive of society; as a form of
social mediation, wage-labor had become self-contradictory and self-undermining in the
Industrial Revolution, hence the “crisis of capital.”

The potential transformation of capitalist society does not involve the
confrontation of two antithetical social principles, of the workers (collectivism) vs. the
capitalists (individual private property). Capital, as Marx understood it, is not based on
the mode of existence of the capitalists, falsely generalized to society as a whole, but
rather that of the workers. This is not a top–down, but a bottom–up, view — shared by
Smith, for example. As Lukács put it, the fate of the worker becomes that of “society as a
whole” (“Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat” [1922] part 1, “The
phenomenon of reification” in History and class consciousness: studies in Marxist
dialectics [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971], 91). The contradiction of capital is the
contradiction of the workers’ — not the capitalists’ — existence in society. For Marx,
capital is a social mode of production and not merely a relation of production. As a mode
of production, capital has become increasingly self-contradictory. As a function of
capital’s historical development, through the Industrial Revolution, in which the workers’
own increasing demands for bourgeois rights, to realize the value of their labor, and not merely capitalist competition, played a key, indispensable role, bourgeois society became self-contradictory and self-undermining. That is, the workers centrally or at base constituted the self-destructive, social-historical dynamic of capital through their laboring and political activity. This development culminated in the crisis of world war and revolution 1914–19.

As Lenin put it in *The state and revolution*, the social relations of bourgeois society — namely, the mutual exchange of labor as the form of social solidarity in capital — could only be transformed gradually and thus “wither away,” and not be abolished and replaced at a stroke (*The state and revolution* chapter 5, “The economic basis of the withering away of the state,” part 3, “The first phase of communist society”). The proletarian socialist revolution was supposed to open the door to this transformation. The potential for emancipated humanity expressed in communism that Marx recognized in the modern history of capital is not assimilable without remainder to pre- or non-Marxian socialism. Marx was not the pre-eminent communist or socialism of his time, but rather the critic of communism, seeking to push it further. Marxism was the attempted Hegelian self-consciousness of proletarian socialism as the subject-object of capital.

One common misapprehension of Marx (against which, however, many counter-arguments have been made, not least by Lukács and Korsch themselves) has been with respect to the supposed “logic of history” in capital. The notion of a “historical logic” is problematic, in that there may be assumed an underlying historical logic that Marx, as a
social scientist, is supposed to have discovered. Marx’s (and Engels’s) idea of “science,” however, is not the conventional one of recognizing objective facts independent of the scientific observer, but rather the Hegelian one of knowledge aware of its own conditions of possibility. This philosophical approach to “science” began with Kant, and regards theoretical concepts as self-critical reflections arising from practice. In other words, Hegelian “science,” in the original Marxist sense of Marx and Engels’s use of the term, is the attempt to raise practice to greater self-awareness. “Consciousness” is formed in the dialectic of theory and practice. Furthermore, consciousness develops in a dialectic with “social being.” This is because Marxism was not concerned with how social being “determines” consciousness, but with how both social being and consciousness can change. It was the unfreedom of this process of change in modern society that Marx sought to address in his critical account of capital. For Marx, the “logic of capital” was not a logic at all. Capital was, in Marx’s view, a process of social disintegration, in fits and starts, and no wheel of history — at least not in terms of freedom.

From this perspective, the defeat of the workers’ movement for socialism did not mean the stabilization, but rather the degeneration, disintegration and decomposition, of bourgeois society — without the concomitant increase, but rather the regression, of possibilities for moving beyond it. In this view, such phenomena demonstrated that the crisis of Marxism was a crisis of bourgeois society, or the highest and most acute aspect of the crisis of capital: bourgeois society suffered since then from the failure of Marxism. Luxemburg and Lenin grasped how the history of the socialist workers’ movement and
Marxism was a key part — indeed the crucial aspect — of this development, in the first
two decades of the 20th century. The crisis of Marxism was the highest practical
expression of the crisis of bourgeois society.

Furthermore, Marxism, as an expression of the workers’ historical “class-
consciousness”, was entirely “bourgeois,” if *in extremis*. While self-contradictory in its
development, the socialist workers’ movement, including its Marxist self-consciousness,
pointed beyond itself, ‘dialectically’ — as consciousness of the bourgeois epoch as a
whole did.

**Marxism as a hypothesis**

This raises certain issues regarding the history of the high period of Marxism. The period
from 1871–1917 saw the massive growth and development of Marxism (alongside and
indeed bound up with the last great flowering of bourgeois society and culture in the
*Belle Époque*[^40]), and culminated in the crisis of war and revolution, which the standard,
post-1917 20th century account of Marxism avoids—or, more precisely, evades. That is,
this period raises the question of Marxism as such, and its significance in history.

A set of historical periodizations, and hence a specific history, focused on certain
developments, might be posed with Adorno. A rendering of Marxism as hypothetical,

which Adorno stated that, “Already in the twenties, as a consequence of the events of [the failure of the
German Revolution in] 1919, the decision had fallen against that political potential that, had things gone
otherwise, with great probability would have influenced developments in Russia and prevented Stalinism.”
So, “that the twenties were a world where ‘everything may be permitted,’ that is, a utopia . . . only seemed
so” (43). Indeed, according to Adorno, “The heroic age . . . was actually around 1910” (41). See note [],
below.
that is, a hypothesis about the historical significance of Marxism itself, would seek to grasp the history of the specifically modern society of capital, the different historical phases of capital as characterized by Marx’s and other Marxists’ accounts, beginning in the mid-19th century. But, as the Nietzsche scholar Peter Preuss has put it, “the 19th century had discovered history and all subsequent inquiry and education bore the stamp of this discovery. This was not simply the discovery of a set of facts about the past but the discovery of the historicity of man.”

Marx, then, would be the central figure in developing the critical recognition of history as an invention of the 19th century. The other names associated with this consciousness of history are Hegel and Nietzsche; relating these three thinkers is a deep problem, long pondered by Marxists. Hence, it is significant that Marx comes between Hegel and Nietzsche.

The hypothesis of Marxism is premised on Marx’s theoretical and political engagement with the problem he articulated throughout his life, from the Communist Manifesto to Capital, and includes the political thought and action inspired by and seeking to follow and develop upon Marx. This problem is the historical specificity of

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42 See Louis Menand’s 2003 Introduction to the republication of Edmund Wilson’s To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), originally published in 1940, in which Menand cites Wilson’s statement that “Marx and Engels were the philosophes of a second Enlightenment” (xvi). Furthermore, Menand points out that, Marxism gave a meaning to modernity. . . . Marxism was founded on an appeal for social justice, but there were many forms that such an appeal might have taken. Its deeper attraction was the discovery of meaning, a meaning in which human beings might participate, in history itself. (xiii)
capital — and hence of history itself. For the hypothesis of Marxism is that capital is the condition of possibility for what Kant called “universal history.” However, by contrast with Kant, for whom universal history was positively productive, for Adorno, “universal history must be both construed and denied” (Negative Dialectics, 320), meaning recognized but not accepted, for in capitalism the process of history has become destructive and thus “negative,” an object of critique. What Kant and Marx had in common (with Hegel) was a view of history as tasking of freedom. Hence, the history of Marxism itself, which is part and not apart from the course of the history of modern society, must be approached critically and symptomatically: in this view, Marxism does not provide a positive project of history but rather the critical instantiation of history as it has developed in capital. (See Chapter V.)

Such a history of Marxism is complicated, layered, non-linear, and non-evental. It is divided into the different periods in the history of Marxism: from 1848–95, the

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45 For example, for Kant, in “Idea for a universal history,” history is not itself progress, in that [T]he vitality of mankind may fall asleep. . . . Until this last step to a union of states is taken, which is the halfway mark in the development of mankind, human nature must suffer the cruelest hardships under the guise of external well-being; and Rousseau was not far wrong in preferring the state of savages, so long, that is, as the last stage to which the human race must climb is not attained. . . . [Mere civilization,] however, is nothing but pretense and glittering misery. In such a condition the human species will no doubt remain until . . . it works its way out of the chaotic conditions of its international relations. ()

Similarly, Hegel wrote that, The question of the means by which Freedom develops itself to a World, conducts us to the phenomenon of History itself. . . . But even regarding History as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized — the question involuntarily arises — to what principle, to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have been offered. From this point the investigation usually proceeds to that which we have made the general commencement of our inquiry. (Hegel, The Philosophy of History, trans. J. Sibree [New York: Dover, 2004], 21.)
publication of Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* to Engels’s death, to 1914–19, the crisis of Marxism in war and revolution; and from 1923–40, post-Bolshevik Marxism, to 1968–89, the New Left and the collapse of official Communism. These are periods in the history of Marxism, which are conceived as the history of what Marx regarded as “capital.” This is the history of capital and its potential overcoming, as expressed in the history of Marxism.46

Such a historical account is motivated by the need for what Karl Korsch called, in his 1923 essay “Marxism and Philosophy,” the historical-materialist analysis and critique of Marxism itself, or a Marxist history and theory of Marxism.47 This would be a history of the emergence, crisis, and decline of Marxism as expressing the possibility of getting beyond capital, as Marx and the best Marxists understood this. Today, as opposed to Korsch’s time in 1923, this would include consideration of the possibility that the potential Marxism expressed missed its chance, and has carried on only in a degenerate, spectral way, until passing effectively into history. That such an account is possible at all is what motivates the fundamental “hypothesis” of Marxism, or the Marxist hypothesis—the hypothesis that Marxism, as a perspective and politics, could be the vital nerve center of modern history. For Marxism was the grandest of all Grand Narratives of history, with reason. Today, the question is what was Marxism?

46 For instance, the title of Lenin’s pamphlet *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) indicates what the historical era of “imperialism” meant to Lenin and other contemporary Marxists: the eve of revolution. The self-understanding of the Marxists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries grounded the history of Marxism itself in the history of capital, even if their propagandistic rhetoric had the unfortunate character of calling the crisis of capital expressed by Marxism “inevitable.” See note [], below.
Prevalent among post-Leninist Marxists in the 20th century, the period of Marxism from 1871–1917, which saw the foundation and growth of the parties of the Second International, was regarded as the era of “revisionism,” in which Marxist revolutionary politics was swamped by reformism. But this was also the period of the struggle against the reformist revision of Marxism by Marx and Engels’s epigones, such as Bebel, Bernstein, Kautsky, and Plekhanov. This struggle against reformism was conducted by the students of these very same disciples of Marx, and involved a complex change, itself an important historical transition, in which the students were disappointed by and came to surpass their teachers.48

The greatest achievement of the struggle against reformism in the Second International was the Bolshevik leadership of the October Revolution, followed by the (however abortive) revolutions in Germany, Hungary and Italy, and the establishment of the Third “Communist” International.49 The world crisis of war and revolution 1914–19 should be regarded properly as the Götterdämmerung of Marxism, which raised the crisis of capital to the realm of politics, in a way not seen before or since. The crisis of Marxism 1914–19 was a civil war among Marxists. On one side, the younger generation

49 In a portentous first footnote to his book What is to be Done? (1902), available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/i.htm>, Lenin put it this way:
Incidentally, in the history of modern socialism [there] is a phenomenon . . . in its way very consoling, namely . . . the strife of the various trends within the socialist movement. . . . [In] the disputes between Lassalleans and Eisenachers, between Guesdists and Possibilists, between Fabians and Social-Democrats, and between Narodnaya Volya adherents and Social-Democrats . . . really [an] international battle with socialist opportunism, [will] international revolutionary Social-Democracy . . . perhaps become sufficiently strengthened to put an end to the political reaction that has long reigned in Europe?
of radicals that had risen in and ultimately split the Second International and established the Third, most prominently Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky, led the greatest attempt to change the world in history. They regarded their division in Marxism as expressing the necessity of human emancipation. That their attempt must be judged today a failure does not alter its profound — and profoundly enigmatic — character.

The stakes of the Revolution attempted by the Second International radicals, inspired by Marx, cannot be overestimated. For Marx and his followers, the epoch of capital was both the culmination of history and marked the potential end of pre-history

50 See Leon Trotsky, “Art and Politics in Our Epoch,” a June 18, 1938 letter to the editors of Partisan Review, available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/06/artpol.htm>:

Not a single progressive idea has begun with a “mass base,” otherwise it would not have been a progressive idea. It is only in its last stage that the idea finds its masses—if, of course, it answers the needs of progress. All great movements have begun as “splinters” of older movements. . . . The group of Marx and Engels came into existence as a “splinter” of the Hegelian Left. The Communist [Third] International germinated during [WWI] from the “splinters” of the Social Democratic [Second] International. If these pioneers found themselves able to create a mass base, it was precisely because they did not fear isolation. They knew beforehand that the quality of their ideas would be transformed into quantity. These “splinters” . . . carried within themselves the germs of the great historical movements of tomorrow.

51 See Korsch, Marxism and Philosophy:

[A] transformation and development of Marxist theory has been effected under the peculiar ideological guise of a return to the pure teaching of original or true Marxism. Yet it is easy to understand both the reasons for this guise and the real character of the process which is concealed by it. What theoreticians like Rosa Luxemburg in Germany and Lenin in Russia have done, and are doing, in the field of Marxist theory is to liberate it from the inhibiting traditions of [Social Democracy]. They thereby answer the practical needs of the new revolutionary stage of proletarian class struggle, for these traditions weighed “like a nightmare” on the brain of the working masses whose objectively revolutionary socioeconomic position no longer corresponded to these [earlier] evolutionary doctrines. The apparent revival of original Marxist theory in the Third International is simply a result of the fact that in a new revolutionary period not only the workers’ movement itself, but the theoretical conceptions of communists which express it, must assume an explicitly revolutionary form. This is why large sections of the Marxist system, which seemed virtually forgotten in the final decades of the nineteenth century, have now come to life again. (67–68)
and the true beginning of human history, in communism. As Walter Benjamin put it, “humanity is preparing to outlive culture, if need be”—that is, to survive civilization, as it has been lived for an eon.

While Marx and Engels had written of the “specter” of communism, in the 20th century it was the memory of Marx that haunted the world. This difference is important to register: Marx and Engels could count on a political movement — communism — that they sought to clarify and raise to self-consciousness of its historical significance. Later, by contrast, the need was to remember not the historical political movement so much as the form of critical consciousness given expression in Marxism. This must be traced back to the thought and political action of Marx himself.

If Marx is mistaken for an affirmer and promulgator of “communism” as opposed to what he actually was, its most incisive critic (from within), we risk forgetting the most

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52 Adorno, in “Reflections on Class Theory” (originally written in 1942), provides the following unequivocally powerful interpretation of the perspective of Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto*: According to theory, history is the history of class struggles. But the concept of class is bound up with the emergence of the proletariat. . . . By extending the concept of class to prehistory, theory . . . turns against prehistory itself. . . . By exposing the historical necessity that had brought capitalism into being, political economy became the critique of history as a whole. . . . All history is the history of class struggles because it was always the same thing, namely, prehistory. (*Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 93–94.)


54 The term used to describe this effect is the “Anthropocene.” Jeffrey Sachs, in the second of his 2007 Reith Lectures, “Survival in the Anthropocene” (Peking University, Beijing, April 18, 2007, available online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2007/lecture2.shtml>), characterized it this way: “The Anthropocene”—a term that is spectacularly vivid, a term invented by one of the great scientists of our age, Paul Crutzen, to signify the fact that human beings for the first time have taken hold not only of the economy and of population dynamics, but of the planet’s physical systems, Anthropocene meaning human-created era of Earth’s history. The geologists call our time the Holocene—the period of the last thirteen thousand years or so since the last Ice Age—but Crutzen wisely and perhaps shockingly noted that the last two hundred years are really a unique era, not only in human history but in the Earth’s physical history as well.
important if fragile achievement of history: the consciousness of potential in capital. As Marx wrote early on, in an 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge that called for the “ruthless criticism of everything existing,” “Communism is a dogmatic abstraction and… only a particular manifestation of the humanistic principle and is infected by its opposite, private property.”

The potential for emancipated humanity expressed in communism that Marx recognized in the modern history of capital is not assimilable without remainder to pre- or non-Marxian socialism. Marx’s thought and politics are not continuous with the Spartacus slave revolt against Rome or the teachings of the Apostles — or with the radical egalitarianism of the Protestants or the Jacobins. As Marx put it, “Communism is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism as such is not the goal of human development, the form of human society.” Communism, as a form of discontent in capital, thus demanded critical clarification of its own meaning, and not one-sided endorsement. For Marx thought that communism was a means and not an end in itself. Marx sought, in his own thought and politics, to comprehend and transcend the specifically modern phenomenon of communism, that is, the modern social-democratic workers’ movement emerging in the 19th century, as a constituent of capital, as a historically specific form of humanity. So, what would it mean to view the


history of the modern society of capital through the figure of Marx? The possibility of such was the hypothesis of Adorno’s Marxism.

It went a long way in making sense of the most important historical figures of communism after Marx, such as Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Bukharin, Lukács, Stalin, and Mao, among others, to evaluate them as followers of Marx. It is significant that they themselves had sought to justify their own political thought and action in such terms — and were regarded for this by their political opponents as sectarian dogmatists, disciples of Marxism as a religion. But how did they think that they were following Marx? What are we to make of the most significant and profound political movement of the last two centuries, calling itself “Marxist,” and led by people who, in debate, never ceased to quote Marx at each other? What has been puzzled over in such disputes, and what were—and are still, potentially—the political consequences of such disagreement over the meaning of Marx?

Certainly, Marxism was disparaged as a religion, and Marx as a prophet. (For instance, Leszek Kolakowski dismissed Marxism as the “farcical aspect of human bondage.”57) But what of Marx as a philosopher?58 On the face of it, this does not seem like a particularly propitious basis for judging Marx, either in terms of his own thinking and practice or regarding “philosophy” as a discipline, unless Marx’s philosophy is understood as indicating how we have not yet overcome the problems he identified in

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57 Leszek Kolakowski, Main Currents in Marxism (New York: Norton, 2005), 1212.
58 If Marx has been widely discredited today as a political thinker, nevertheless, in 2005, for instance, a survey of BBC listeners polled Marx as the “greatest philosopher of all time,” well ahead of Socrates, Kant, Nietzsche, and others.
modern society. As far as the reputation of Marx as a thinker was concerned, Adorno seem to have been left with “Marxism” but without Marx’s own “communist” politics: “Marxism” survived as a “theory,” but without clear practical importance; “communism” in Marx’s sense survived as an ethic without effective politics.

Adorno’s hypothetic treatment of Marxism was such that the relation between Marx and “communism” needed to be posed again, but in decidedly non-traditional ways, casting the history of Marxism in a critical light. For it was not that communism found a respected comrade in Marx — perhaps more (or less) estimable than others — but that Marx’s thought and political action formed an irreducibly singular model that could yet be considered tasking, and to which one could still aspire. Hence, the continued potential purchase of “Marx-ism.” The question was not the future of communism, but of Marx.

To address any potential future of Marxism, then, it was necessary to revisit Marx’s own Marxism and its implications. This went back to the 19th century and 1848 in particular. Marx pointed out about the 1848–49 revolution in Germany, in which he immediately involved himself after writing the *Manifesto*, that the capitalists were more afraid of the workers asserting their bourgeois rights than they were of the Prussian state taking away theirs. This was not because of a conflicting class interest between the capitalists and Junkers (Prussian landed aristocracy), but rather because of the emerging

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59 See Robert Pippin, “Critical Inquiry and Critical Theory: A Short History of Nonbeing,” *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (Winter 2004), 424–428, also available online at <http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/issues/v30/30n2.Pippin.html>. Pippin wrote that, [T]he dim understanding we have of the post-Kantian situation with respect to, let’s say, “the necessary conditions for the possibility of what isn’t”… is what I wanted to suggest. I’m not sure it will get us anywhere. Philosophy rarely does. Perhaps it exists to remind us that we haven’t gotten anywhere. (428)
authoritarianism in post-Industrial Revolution capital, at a global scale. For such authoritarianism was also characteristic of the revolution of 1848 in France, in which Napoleon’s nephew Louis Bonaparte’s rule, as the first elected President of the Second Republic (1848–52), and then, after his coup d’etat, as Emperor of the Second Empire (1852–70), could not be characterized as expressing the interest of some non-bourgeois class (the “peasants,” whom Marx insisted on calling, pointedly, “petit bourgeois”), but rather of all the classes of bourgeois society, including the “lumpenproletariat,” in crisis by the mid-19th century. As Marx put it mordantly, in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852), bourgeois fanatics for order were shot down on their balconies in the name of defense of the social order. The late 19th century rule of Napoleon III and Bismarck — and U.K. Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli — mirrored each other. Marx analyzed the authoritarianism of post-1848 society, in which the state seems to rise over civil life, as a situation in which the bourgeoisie were no longer and the proletariat not yet able to master capital. This was the crisis of bourgeois society that Marx recognized. It was not a history of ruling class power opposed by the resistance of the oppressed. As early as 1848 Marx was not a theorist of classes but capital, of which modern socio-

60 See Marx, The Class Struggles in France 1848–50 (originally published in 1850) and The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (originally published in 1852).
61 Marx, Eighteenth Brumaire, in Tucker, ed., Marx-Engels Reader: Every demand of the simplest bourgeois financial reform, of the most ordinary liberalism, of the most formal republicanism, of the most insipid democracy, is simultaneously castigated as an “attempt on society” and stigmatized as “socialism.” . . . Bourgeois fanatics for order are shot down on their balconies by mobs of drunken soldiers, their domestic sanctuaries profaned . . . in the name of property, of family . . . and of order. . . . Finally, the scum of bourgeois society forms . . . the “saviour of society.” (602–603)
political classes were “phantasmagorical” projections. Marx sought to situate, not capital in the history of class struggle, but history in capital, to which social struggles and their history were subordinate.

Rousseau had raised a hypothetical “state of nature” in order to throw contemporary society into critical relief. In so doing, Rousseau sought to bring society closer to a “state of nature.” Liberal, bourgeois society was a model and an aspiration for Rousseau. For Rousseau, it was human “nature” to be free. Humans achieved a higher “civil liberty” of “moral freedom” in society than they could enjoy as animals, with mere “physical” freedom in nature. Indeed, as animals, humans are not free, but rather slaves to their natural needs and instincts. Only in society could freedom be achieved, and humans free themselves from their natural, animal condition. When Rousseau was writing, in the mid-18th century, the promise of freedom in bourgeois society was still on the horizon. Bourgeois society aspired to proximity to the “state of nature” in the sense of bringing humanity, both collectively and individually, closer to its potential, to better realize its freedom. With Marx, communism, too, aimed for the realization of this potential. The imagination of a “primitive communism,” closer to a “state of nature” of unspoiled human potential, recapitulated the Rousseauian vision of bourgeois society as emancipation. But, in capitalism, bourgeois society had come to violate its own promised potential. It had become a “state of nature,” not in Rousseau’s sense, but rather according

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64 See “Capital in history” below.
to Hobbes, a “war of all against all”—a conception that Rousseau had critiqued. Society was not to be the suspension of hostilities, but the realization of freedom. Moreover, humanity in society exhibited a “general will,” not reducible to its individual members: more than the sum of its parts. Not a Leviathan, but a “second nature,” a rebirth of potential, both individually and collectively. Human nature found the realization of its freedom in society, but humans were free to develop and transform themselves, for good or ill. To bring society closer to the “state of nature,” then, was to allow humanity’s potential to be better realized. Communism, according to Marx, was to follow Rousseau, not Hobbes, in realizing bourgeois society’s aspirations and potential. But, first, communism had to be clear about its aims.

Adorno’s hypothesis of Marxism was that Marx’s thought and politics corresponded to a moment of profound transformation in the history of modern society, indeed, in the history of humanity: the rise of “industrial capital” and of the concomitant “social-democratic” workers’ movement that attended this change. This was expressed in the workers’ demand for social democracy, which Marx thought needed to be raised to greater self-consciousness to achieve its aims.66 Marx characterized the moment of industrial capital as marking the crisis in modern society—or even, an event and crisis in “natural history”67—in which humanity faced the choice, as Luxemburg put it (echoing

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66 See Marx, “For the ruthless criticism of everything existing.”
67 See note [ ] above. See also Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History” (originally written in 1932), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Telos 57 (1985): “[I]t is not a question of completing one theory by another, but of the immanent interpretation of a theory. I submit myself, so to speak, to the authority of the materialist dialectic” (124).
Engels) of “socialism or barbarism.” This was because classical bourgeois forms of politics that had emerged in the preceding era of the rise of manufacturing capital in the 17th and 18th centuries, liberalism and democracy, proved to be inadequate to the problems and tasks of modern society since the 19th century, Marx’s moment. With Marx, humanity faced a new, unforeseen task. However, unfulfilled, this task had fallen into neglect.

In the transformed circumstance of capital, liberalism and democracy became necessary precisely in their impossibility, and thus pointed to their “dialectical” Aufhebung — completion and transcendence through negation, or self-overcoming.

Liberalism and democracy became not only mutually contradictory but each became self-contradictory in capital. It is thus not a matter of communism versus liberal democracy. Communism was, for Marx, the political movement that pointed to the possibility of overcoming the necessity of liberalism and democracy, or the transcending of the need for “bourgeois” politics per se. But this was to be achieved through the politics of the demands for the bourgeois rights of the working class. Marx regarded the socialism and

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69 See Korsch, Marxism and Philosophy:

[Marx wrote, in the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859), that] “[Humanity] always sets itself only such problems as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely it will always be found that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or are at least understood to be in the process of emergence.” This dictum is not affected by the fact that a problem which supersedes present relations may have been formulated in an anterior epoch. (58)

70 On this point, see some of Marx’s earliest writings, which provided the points of departure for his more mature work, such as “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” (1843), “On [Bruno Bauer’s] The Jewish Question” (1843), and The Poverty of Philosophy (1847).
communism that had emerged in his time as expressing a late, and hence self-contradictory and potentially incoherent form of bourgeois radicalism — expressing the *radicalization* of bourgeois society — but that demanded redemption. Marx had sought the potential in capital of going beyond demands for greater liberalism and democracy. Subsequent “communism” lost sight of Marx on this, and disintegrated into the 20th century antinomy of socialism and liberalism. Adorno’s hypothetical approach to Marxism was that Marx recognized the possibility, not of opposition, but of a qualitative transformation, in, through and beyond bourgeois society.

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71 As Adorno put it in his lectures on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, “We might almost say, then, that what has been codified in the Critique of Pure Reason is a theodicy of bourgeois life which is conscious of its own practical activity while despairing of the fulfillment of its utopia.”

72 But, for Marx and Engels, there was no necessary contradiction between the freedom of the individual and that of the collective, or, in this sense, between liberalism and socialism: “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 491, also available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>).

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Part 3. Themes

Chapter V. History

In pre-modern societies, the ends of life are given at the beginning of life: people do things in their generation so that the same things will continue to be done in the next generation. Meaning is immanent in all the ordinary customs and practices of existence, since these are inherited from the past, and are therefore worth reproducing. The idea is to make the world go not forward, only around. In modern societies, the ends of life are not given at the beginning of life; they are thought to be created or discovered. The reproduction of the customs and practices of the group is no longer the chief purpose of existence; the idea is not to repeat, but to change, to move the world forward. Meaning is no longer immanent in the practices of ordinary life, since those practices are understood by everyone to be contingent and time-bound. This is why death, in modern societies, is the great taboo, an absurdity, the worst thing one can imagine. For at the close of life people cannot look back and know that they have accomplished the task set for them at birth. This knowledge always lies up ahead, somewhere over history’s horizon. Modern societies don’t know what will count as valuable in the conduct of life in the long run, because they have no way of knowing what conduct the long run will find itself in a position
to respect. The only certain knowledge death comes with is the knowledge that the values of one's own time, the values one has tried to live by, are expunge-able. . . .

Marxism gave a meaning to modernity. It said that, wittingly or not, the individual performs a role in a drama that has a shape and a goal, a trajectory, and that modernity will turn out to be just one act in that drama. Historical change is not arbitrary. It is generated by class conflict; it is faithful to an inner logic; it points toward an end, which is the establishment of the classless society. Marxism was founded on an appeal for social justice, but there were many forms that such an appeal might have taken. Its deeper attraction was the discovery of meaning, a meaning in which human beings might participate, in history itself. When Wilson explained, in his introduction to the 1972 edition of To the Finland Station, that his book had been written under the assumption that “an important step in progress has been made, that a fundamental ‘breakthrough’ had occurred,” this is the faith he was referring to. . . . Marx and Engels were the philosophs of a second Enlightenment.

— Introduction by Louis Menand (2003), Edmund Wilson, To the Finland Station (1940)
1. Adorno and Benjamin’s philosophy of history

The relevance of history is not given but made, in a dialectical sense. As Marx put it, humanity makes history but not under conditions of its own choosing (The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, 1852). History is made but in ways that also produce us, and so we need to be conscious of how history is made and reflect upon its significance, rather than taking it for granted. Furthermore, “history” itself is a modern discovery: history is historical. This is not least why Walter Benjamin spoke, in his 1940 “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” of the “writing” of history, historiography on the Marxist Left being urgent for emancipatory politics, for the possibilities for social emancipation are not only historical but point to potentials beyond the historical, to the possibility of getting beyond history, for which capital might be the beginning and the end.

Benjamin's concept of “constellation” refers to the sense that historical moments might not have pertinence to the present in a linear-progressive way. Rather, these historical constellations appear as structuring figures in the constitution of the present, as enduring problems yet to be worked through. Hence something that happened more recently might not have more immediate relevance to problems of the present than something that happened longer ago. Something later might expire faster because it is less essential to the present than something earlier might allow us to grasp.

Such constellations in the appearance of history are involuntary: as Benjamin put it, they “flash up;” as Marx put it, they “weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” So history cannot be an inventory of “lessons already learned.” According to
Nietzsche, responding to the Hegelian account of history as the story of reason and freedom, there is in history a dialectic of enlightenment and mythologization. For, as Benjamin put it, “even the dead are not safe.” The significance of the past changes as a function of the present. The meaning of history is itself a symptom to be worked through. This is why Benjamin spoke of regarding history from the standpoint of its redemption. What value do past thoughts and actions have? The history of Marxism furnishes a set of questions and problems that we are tasked to answer according to the way the problem of freedom presents to us. But, as Adorno put it (in *Negative Dialectics*, 1966), “What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations.”

For Benjamin, this non-linear function of the past in the present constitutes the critical purchase of the melancholic-neurotic compulsion to repeat, the capture of the present by the past, but as a symptom to be worked through, in the Freudian sense that a symptom potentially yields, together, both knowledge and freedom.

**The early 20th century history in retrospect — introduction to the history of Marxism**

As Adorno put it in his 1962 essay “Those Twenties,” responding to post-WWII cultural nostalgia for the period of the Weimar Republic in Germany, the liberal democracy between post-WWI counterrevolution and the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, the crisis manifesting the radical potential to begin to move beyond capital had already occurred
before WWI: WWI itself was the product of the failure to make good on this crisis, and
the failure of the revolutions in 1917-19 in Russia and Germany were inextricably linked
in a world-historical context. Failure of revolution in Germany at the close of the war,
exemplified by the isolation and suppression of Rosa Luxemburg’s Spartacus League,
conditioned the trajectory of the revolution in Russia and resulted in Stalinism, as well as
fascism (in Italy etc.), Nazism (in Germany), World War II and the Holocaust. For
Adorno all of this subsequent history had been already in a sense settled and prefigured,
set in motion by the defeat of Luxemburg’s Spartacists in 1919. For the generation of
Marxists to which Adorno belonged, this failure was the lodestar for all their subsequent
thought. For Adorno, the Weimar period, the “roaring Twenties,” though appearing as a
period of liberalization, of social-political polarization and turmoil, cultural radicalism
and innovation, as well as the apparent resurgence of a revolutionary Left at a global
scale during the Great Depression of the late-’20s - early ’30s that followed, had been
already too late. It is this “lateness” of the historical period of the 1920s-30s that
characterizes what Fredric Jameson has called Adorno’s “late Marxism.”

Adorno and Benjamin’s Marxism

Implicit in Adorno’s Marxism is a philosophy of history for the 20th century and the role
of Marxism in this history, one developed first and foremost by Adorno’s mentor and
friend Walter Benjamin. The relation of Adorno’s Marxism to Benjamin’s critique of and
negative reconfiguration of the philosophy of history is the subject of this chapter.
In discussing Adorno’s relation to the thoughts and actions of the antecedent 2nd International Marxist radicalism that culminated in the events and actions of 1917-19 and were exemplified in the history of Marxism by the figures Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky, this discussion might follow a standard intellectual history of background and influences.

However, a perhaps more controversial claim will be that not only is Adorno’s thought properly illuminated only with reference to historical figures of revolutionary Marxism, but that such Marxist politics might find true illumination and expression only in Adorno’s (retrospective) critical theoretical digestion of it.

Indeed, similar points could be made in the history of philosophy and critical theory, that the French Revolution and its trajectory might find its most adequate self-understanding in the works of Kant, Schiller and Hegel rather than in the speeches and acts of Lafayette, Robespierre and Napoleon, and that the true social-political stakes of the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of the modern workers movement in the 19th century might find adequate self-consciousness only in Marx’s critique of them rather than in the contemporary apologias of bourgeois political economy or in the socialist political responses of the moment. In Lukács’s “Hegelian Marxist” characterization of this, following Hegel’s observation that “the Owl of Minerva flies only at dusk,” perhaps something in the process of becoming is only adequately known in the struggle to overcome it; the only adequately “historical” knowledge is found in the combination of critical theory and transformative practice, as a function of the possibility
to move a historical phenomenon beyond itself. Thus Marxian socialism in theory and practice understands itself as being immanent to capital and its historical transformations.

But, perhaps most disturbingly, this relation to theory and practice has its converse side: not only is adequately emancipatory-transformative practice required producing new insights in theory, but also, since our ability to know the world is tied to our ability to change it in an emancipatory manner, losing the ability to change the world profoundly affects (negatively) our ability to adequately know it.

**Benjamin and Lukács**

Adorno, who was a younger figure who remained largely peripheral to the Frankfurt Institute of Horkheimer and Marcuse in the late 1920s - early ’30s, was initially, in his high school years, an acolyte of his family friend and tutor in the German Idealist philosophical tradition, the cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer. But at the time of Lukács and Korsch’s great publications in 1923, which coincided with the definitive close of the revolutionary period that had opened in 1917, the 19 year-old Adorno had met, through Kracauer, perhaps the most powerful mentor for the further development of his thought, Walter Benjamin, who was 11 years his senior.

Adorno, who outlived Benjamin after his suicide in 1940 by almost 30 years, was forever marked in his works by the effect of Benjamin’s *œuvre*. Adorno learned his Marxism through his critical engagement with Benjamin and his work, for which Adorno served as a sometimes exasperatingly impatient critic and goad.
Adorno spent his first year as a “habilitated” lecturer teaching an intensive seminar on Benjamin’s book on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the culture of the Baroque as early modernity. Adorno’s inaugural lectures in 1931 on “The Idea of the History of Nature” and “The Actuality of Philosophy” are defined by his engagement with Benjamin’s thought in light of the Marxist critical theory that had been given form by Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, a work which had convinced Benjamin of his Marxism. Adorno had met Lukács in Vienna in 1925, but had already been impressed at that time by the significance of Lukács’s retreat from his 1923 work under pressure from Soviet Communist “orthodoxy.” Lukács’s work was seminal for Benjamin and Adorno in this dual sense that it had opened possible developments for critical Marxist theory but its reception and impact were inseparable from the defeat and retreat from the revolutionary moment of 1917-19 Lukács had sought to digest. This tension in Lukács’s work and its significance, was productive, not for Lukács’s further work, which became conservative in its own manner, but rather for those who followed Lukács’s initial attempted thinking-through of the radical departure from “vulgar Marxism” by the Marxist radicals Lenin and Luxemburg. The further development of this departure for Lukács’s work fell to thinkers like Benjamin and Adorno. However, their following Lukács was itself necessarily in the nature of a critical response, as changing historical conditions of counterrevolution and reaction in the 1920s and ’30s motivated a complication and disputation of what revolutionary Marxism had become in the Stalinized international Communism of this period, a new affirmative ideology.
Thus Benjamin’s work of this period formed for Adorno a response to and complement of Lukács’s theoretical critique of “reification” that was meant to corroborate the Bolshevik departure in practice from the passive, contemplative and opportunistically adaptive “vulgar Marxism” of conservatized 2nd International Social Democracy. Indeed, as Adorno’s understood it, Benjamin’s work involved, pace Lukács, an “endorsement” of “reification,” in “critical objectification,” which sought to work through “reified appearance” “immanently.” This was the founding insight of Benjamin’s literary and cultural criticism, the productive attempt to find the (past) emancipatory potential that (still) charged the aesthetics of appearance in modern cultural forms, from Baudelaire and the popular cultural forms of the 19th century (in the Arcades Project), Proust and Kafka, to Dada, Brecht, the Surrealists, and photography and cinema — all of the supposed expressions of resigned cultural “modernism” which for Lukács (and others) was exemplary of the decline of bourgeois society in crisis and reaction.

**History, the persistence of reification and “progressive barbarism”**

However, with the failure of revolution, the historical significance of this culture of late modernity and its further implications and possibilities had changed. As Luxemburg had put it in the crisis of WWI, echoing Marx and Engels, modern society faced the choice of “socialism or barbarism.” But, since socialism was not achieved, Benjamin found his consciousness critically tasked with finding the paradoxically “progressive” character of the “barbarism” that resulted. Rather than being overcome as Lukács had forecast, the
“reified appearance” of capitalism took on a new saliency. Benjamin set about the task of bringing such forms of reification, which needed to be considered as forms of self-objectified Spirit, as new forms of freedom and its further tasks, and not merely its obstacles, to critical self-consciousness, not affirmatively, but symptomologically, for they had not been overcome in practice but remained to be worked through, and so affected the critical theory of modernity.

Thus, regarding “reification,” Adorno’s work (in Gillian Rose’s characterization) necessarily charted the “hard road between Lukács and Benjamin,” attempting to grasp the substance of Marxist critical theory between the antinomic aspects of the commodity form that appear as the problems — and immanently critical potentials — of the “dynamic” and the “static” dimensions of social life in capital. Where Lukács emphasized the emancipatory potential of the dynamic of society mediated by commodified labor, Benjamin emphasized the symptomology of the static “congealing” of value as something to be worked through rather than simply as false or melancholically resigned consciousness. In Adorno’s treatment, following Benjamin, this also meant a changed significance of the dynamic character of modern social life, however, with implications for how historical temporality was apprehended. In Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness, the adequate “conscioussness of the proletariat” was the critical historical consciousness of this dynamic of capitalist social development. If, for Lukács, the reification that resulted from the unfulfilled potential of the dynamic of capital meant the “temporalization of space and the spatialization of time,” then, for
Benjamin, following Kracauer’s cultural criticism (in his essay on “Photography,” 1927), adequately emancipatory knowledge of history was captured and in a sense blocked by a historicist “absolute continuity of time,” a seamless causal chain that rendered historical meaning temporally homogeneous and hence potentially fatalistically meaningless. For Kracauer, such historicism amounted to the attempted “photography of time,” as photographic representations of space were marked by the “absolute continuity” and homogeneity of the picture plane and its rendering of space. The acceptance and need for this kind of spatial representation in photography was understood as specifically modern. Thus the way “nature” was presented by photography signaled the “go-for-broke game of history,” presenting all of space as an “inventory” of potentially homogeneous knowledge, just as historicism presented all of time as a limitless archive.

For Benjamin, the problem of historical meaning was thus inextricably bound up with the dynamic that provoked consciousness of history itself. “History” was a product of modernity, and was itself a form of appearance of social modernity under capital. “History” was historical, and thus subject to a “historico-philosophic” critique of what its appearance signaled and meant.

“Philosophy of history?” — Hegel and Nietzsche

Thus the central thematic for engaging Adorno’s critical engagement with Benjamin’s work, something that connects the early and late Benjamin, and Adorno’s engagement with Benjamin and life-long further elaboration of his ideas, is the “negative” philosophy
of history Benjamin had developed. An examination of Benjamin’s 1940 “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” his final work, and of earlier writings by Benjamin that help illuminate this work, will provide the categories for grasping the stakes of Benjamin’s critical grasp of the symptomatic “philosophy of history” of advanced modernity — how “history” appears to those living through its conditions.

With the phrase “philosophy of history” two figures immediately come to the fore: Hegel and Nietzsche. Both Nietzsche and Hegel sought to interrogate and problematize the very possibility of a philosophy of history, or of grasping a coherent meaning to history, and so both are foundational for and help to situate Benjamin’s attack on the “historicism” originating in the 19th century and symptomatically characterizing “historical” consciousness since then. The question becomes what it means to think about history. Furthermore, for Benjamin and Adorno, Marx’s observation that history “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” is related to Nietzsche’s observation that modern historical consciousness was pathological and symptomatic and potentially if not manifestly invidious for present life. For Marx and Nietzsche, each in their own way following Hegel, the meaning of history was something not to be deified but rather overcome.

So, crucially, for Benjamin and Adorno, neither Hegel nor Nietzsche can be considered “historicist” thinkers, despite (myriad mistaken) attempts (from Right-Hegelian German academicism to “post-modern” Foucauldian “genealogies”) to base an epistemology or method on their critical philosophical investigations into the meaning of
history, their attempts to raise the appearance of history to critical self-consciousness. Marx sought to follow Hegel in such critical specification of history, and Nietzsche can be considered a contributor parallel to Marx whose work gained a renewed importance as a kind of bad conscience to the vulgarization of Marxism in the late 19th century, when Marxism began exhibiting the same hypostatized progressive view of history that liberalism had demonstrated earlier. Vulgarized Marxism thus had become an affirmative philosophy of history to which Nietzsche’s thought could be productively opposed and brought into tension.

The “progressive” view of history
At the outset, one must distinguish such progressivism from Marx’s (and the Marxists’) apparent “historical” optimism about the possibility of emancipation beyond capital through socialism. Similarly, the regressive character of society conditioned by capital that Marx observed after the failure of the revolutions of 1848 (exemplified for instance in what Marx called the “vulgarization of bourgeois thought”) — and Benjamin and Adorno observed after 1917-19 — must be distinguished from theoretical or practical political pessimism. Also, a related distinction must be made of critical-theoretical grasp of social-historical necessity from practical political possibility. (Such a distinction will not be grasped adequately by, for instance, Gramsci’s [and Trotsky biographer Isaac Deutscher’s] phrase about “pessimism of the intellect” and “optimism of the will.”)

Otherwise, historical consciousness becomes difficult to separate from historical fatalism
— historical consciousness can be by turns affirmative or critical. Such a distinction finds expression in the classical German Idealist distinction of the “is” from the “ought,” and how to understand how what can and should be done, conditions the actuality of the extant, how the present is not merely a result but a possibility charged with further potential. Any thinking about history can only be meaningful to the extent that it allows the communication and intrinsic interrelation of past, present and future.

To do so critically requires the defamiliarization of these categories in thinking, in the spirit of Kant’s “Critiques” that sought to explore and specify the (logical) conditions of possibility for the rational meaning of our — necessarily metaphysical (i.e., non-empirical, transcendental) — categories of thought. For past, present and future refer not to things but moments of cognition, moments of thinking and knowledge, as well as moments for considering possibilities for acting rationally, in the sense of being able to “own” in cognition one’s actions and their effects. Thus the problem of historical action in practice is bound to metaphysical categories of experience, raising problems for thinking about what it means to act in a progressively transformative manner, and the possibilities for doing so in freedom, meaning preserving and not foreclosing further possibilities.

**Metaphysics of history**

An early (pre-Marxist) writing by Benjamin, the “Theologico-Political Fragment” circa 1920, introduces metaphysical categories important for Benjamin’s later engagements
with the problem of historical meaning. In the “Theologico-Political Fragment,”
Benjamin raises two dimensions of historical temporality, one in the profane direction of
the pursuit of happiness, which is understood as informed by the temporality of the
“eternal passing away” of mortal nature, and the other in the sacred direction of
Messianic eschatology, with the consummation of history in redemption at the end of
time, the end of all temporality, with its paradoxical image of the *restitutio in integrum* or
bodily resurrection.

Several schema are raised by Benjamin to help situate the stakes of the meaning
of history along these axial tensions of the opposed pursuits of happiness and redemption.
The failure to attain happiness is what produces the demand for redemption. Happiness is
sacrificed in pursuit of redemption, and redemption is abrogated, its promise forgotten in
the pursuit of happiness. So history as the story of happiness’s failure is necessarily
accompanied by the story of history as the demand for redemption. According to
Benjamin, this means that the pursuit of mortal happiness nevertheless “assists” the
coming of the “Messianic Kingdom” of redemption by “its quietist approach.” Thus
Benjamin attempts to establish a dialectic of happiness and redemption, which also
involves a dialectic of cyclical and linear temporality: linear by way of an end in
redemption, and cyclical by way of the temporality of nature’s “eternal passing away.”

How Benjamin resolves this dialectical contradiction of the simultaneous
informing of meaning in time by its arresting at an end and its uninterrupted movement is
to insist on the one hand that the posed Messianic redemption of temporal suffering can
only be the “end” and not the “goal” or telos of history, and on the other hand that “worldly existence” in both its “spatial” and “temporal” “totality” is “transient,” and thus that the “rhythm” of “Messianic nature” is “happiness,” the achievement of which is the “earthly downfall” that everything is “destined to find” in “good fortune.” For the ancient metaphysics, the passage of time was the revelation of a destiny which was its telos. It was only with enlightenment that such destiny could be challenged and fate escaped. Thus Benjamin seeks to combine, as dialectically constitutive of temporal meaning, the teleological and the cyclical, or the linear-progressive and the recursive aspects of metaphysical categories for grasping the passage of time.

The obsolescence of traditional metaphysics could be found by Benjamin in the rendering of life as meaningless. As he put it, rather than stages of life corresponding to qualitative phases of meaning, in modernity one ages only as a function of there not being enough time to realize everything one was meant to do. Modern people do not advance through meaningful stages life but rather are consumed by time.

**Benjamin and “experience”**

An earlier essay by Benjamin, on “Experience” (1913) establishes a tension in the two German words that can be translated into English as “experience,” erlebnis and erfahrung, the first being merely affecting and the latter being transformative. In this essay, Benjamin raises the problem of the passage of time rendering life “meaningless.” In contrast to an ancient metaphysics of time as a cycle, in which to preserve the meaning...
of life meant to live as one’s ancestors did, modernity brings the contrary demand, that life be meaningful only the extent to which one departs from the ways of one’s ancestors. To live according to one’s ancestral way of life, to repeat the life of one’s parents — to repeat their failures and disenchantment of their pursuit of happiness — became the very image of meaningless existence. The cycle of time became the image of the evacuation of meaning from life, and the concept of “experience” needed to be preserved for the possibility of the new.

In a subsequent essay “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy” (1918), Benjamin addressed Kant’s attempt to rehabilitate metaphysical categories of experience from their post-theological bankruptcy in empiricist Enlightenment. Where Kant asked what the possibilities were for the meaningfully rational (as opposed to mystifying) use of metaphysical categories for grasping what transcended immediately empirical experience, the “unity of apperception” of the “transcendental subject” that was capable of experiencing experience and being transformed, as opposed to merely processing sense data, Benjamin complained that Kant had conceded too much to the Enlightenment disenchantment of theological categories of metaphysics and thus “reduced experience to a point.” Benjamin announced his project to fulfill Kant’s intention to preserve the meaningfulness of metaphysical categories of experience “on the basis of Kant” but against a neo-Kantian positivism and in favor of a (purportedly more authentically) Kantian speculative metaphysics (thus unwittingly reproducing a Hegelian point of departure). In this way, Benjamin sought to grasp the possibility of an “enlightened”
metaphysics, which opens the way to regarding ancient mythological-theological metaphysics as already a form of enlightenment.

**History as a symptom: Nietzsche**

An important inspiration and field of engagement for Benjamin’s philosophy of history is Nietzsche’s thought, especially his 2nd “untimely meditation” on “The Use and Abuse of History for Life” (1873).

In this essay, Nietzsche establishes two sets of categories for the meaning and “practice” of history: the monumental, antiquarian, and critical modes, and the (contrastingly) unhistorical, historical, and suprahistorical comportments. The latter three comportments are the real sites of contention for Nietzsche, with the former three modalities being forms of a historical comportment. However, there is an axis of past, present and future to which the 2 sets of 3 categories correspond. If in our pre-enlightened and animalistic past we were unhistorical, whereas we are now historical by virtue of being human, then we might look forward to becoming suprahistorical, which would not be to revert to the unhistorical, but to become historical in a transformed way that might transcend and overcome the way Nietzsche observed that history became pathological and symptomatic.

Nietzsche’s object of critique is 19th century historicism, which he characterized as the result of long transformation from a monumental to an antiquarian sense of history. Whereas traditional-ancient historiography was essentially indistinguishable from
mythology and allowed the communication of great events and figures of history across time, in the sense of “monuments” of history, a more enlightened and “scientific” sense of history culminating in the (academic) historicism of the 19th century, had brought the dangers of rendering all of past time equally meaningful — or equally meaningless. Just as Nietzsche had observed in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) that ever since the Socratic-Platonic enlightenment of Classical Antiquity, the world had become a space whose depths could be plumbed infinitely as an unlimited source of knowledge, Nietzsche observed that time had become an unlimited field of knowledge in which a historian could endlessly consume the “dust” and “quisquilia” of an infinite archive.

Whereas the earlier 18th century Enlightenment had been suspicious of the inevitably theological roots of historical meaning and regarded history as the story of an ignominious past of benighted superstitions from which the present should be extricated, an “infamy” of ignorance that Voltaire had called to “crush,” by the early 19th century, especially in the traumatic wake of the French Revolution, an anxiety about historical change manifested in the Romantic nostalgia for the pre-modern and a new sense of the potential loss of meaning. For Nietzsche, this melancholic search for a security of meaning in the past could only take place, in this “antiquarian” preservative sense, at the expense of the present form of life and its possible future development. Thus Nietzsche thought history had come to be “abused” and practiced at a “disadvantage” for life.

By contrast, Nietzsche thought that the practice of “critical” history, in which one contested the lineages of the present, could open possibilities for a supra- or post-
historical sense of the meaning of the past in the “service” of “life.” Nietzsche’s sense of “life” as an open-ended transformative process of “self-mastery” and “self-overcoming” harked back to Hegel’s account of “freedom” as an “absolute,” and Kant’s sense of the “moral culture of freedom” that possibilities for human action could not be circumscribed by determinations of “nature.”

**History as the story of reason and freedom: Hegel**

In his “Introduction to the Philosophy of History,” Hegel had contrasted the realms of Spirit and Nature as dialectical — mutually constitutive — categories. Whereas Nature was the realm of the “ever-same,” Spirit was the realm of “change” and the new. While Hegel recognized change in nature, it was not self-motivated and therefore not really change in the sense of the self-bringing-forth of the new, which he attributed to Spirit. Thus Nature and Spirit were dialectically interrelated. Spirit was the transcendental property of Nature by which Nature was itself transformed in an autochthonous and intrinsic and not extrinsic and accidental manner.

Hegel began his investigation into the “philosophy of history” with two questions defining the parameters for the very possibility of a “philosophy of history,” whether reason could be found in history, and whether history could be told as the story of the development of freedom. For Hegel, these were inseparable questions for any “philosophy of history” adequate to his own time, after the Enlightenment and the modern revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries. For Hegel, there was only reason in
history to the extent that it could be told as the story of the self-development and
transformation of Spirit in freedom. Thus “freedom” was an “absolute” in the sense that it
was irreducible to any prior determination. In this sense, freedom was an “Absolute”
value for Spirit, or “humanity,” understood as the “self-moving Substance that is also
Subject.” To be an adequate “subject” of self-development meant that humanity had
come to be able to recognize itself as “free.” But this freedom was itself an open-ended
process, meaning prior forms of humanity such as religion had to be understood as forms
of “freedom,” none of which were an end-point but rather a site of further potential
possibility. In this sense, freedom could not be “possessed” but only pursued — Hegel
has a great quip about the English thinking they possessed freedom and so having “gone
to sleep” as far as the on-going struggle for freedom was concerned; Hegel also has an
analogy for giving up on the struggle for freedom that likened this to becoming middle
aged and giving up on one’s youthful ambitions, which then rendered the rest of one’s
life a mere marking of time in which one had already ceased to live. For Hegel, freedom
was not a state of being but a movement through which one encountered problems as
tasks for further action and development, towards qualitative transformation.

Hegel has been misunderstood as a teleological thinker and this discussion of
freedom in Hegel’s interrogation of the possibility for a “philosophy of history” is a good
occasion to correct this misapprehension. Hegel regarded history as meaningful only to
the extent that it provided a way of grasping the freedom-problem of the present. Hegel
thought that to adequately grasp the tasks of the struggle for freedom in the present meant
treating the present as a necessary and not accidental outcome of prior development. This is what it means to grasp “reason in history.” For reason and freedom are indissolubly combined in Hegel’s understanding of Spirit. One is only free to the extent that one is consciousness of oneself as free, and one is only conscious to the extent that one is free to be conscious of one’s freedom; one is only free to the extent that one can act in a self-transformative manner with self-consciousness, and one is only adequately self-conscious the degree to which one is adequately capable of acting on oneself in self-transformation. The limitations of one are the limitations of the other. The history of Spirit is the story of the development of this “identical subject-object” of history. The degree to which humans have failed to act in freedom and come to such self-consciousness they have remained “without history.” Hegel understood very well that most of human history in an empirical sense was marked by stagnation and regression and not progress (in freedom and reason): not all of the past provides for meaningful history, which is what the object was for Hegel’s “philosophical” investigation of history.

Retrospectively, the only serious limitations of Hegel’s critical investigation of the possibility for a “philosophy of history” are those of the liberal social politics of his time to which his thought gave expression. The problem of finding the meaning of the history of modernity fell subsequently to Marx, coming after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution that Hegel did not live to see, to re-specify the freedom problem of modernity and attempt to bring to adequate self-consciousness the freedom struggles of his time, that of the historically new and emergent industrial working class or
“proletariat,” and what its struggles indicated about the potential further development of humanity. Because human social life became for Marx internally self-contradictory in a historically new way as part and parcel of the Industrial Revolution, humanity became “alienated” from itself, in the Hegelian sense that humanity became tasked to work through what it “is” under capital by way of what it “could be,” in, through and beyond capital, to the extent that this potential, or “ought” informed the “actuality” or further possibility of what “is.” Marx understood capital as the freedom problem of humanity in modernity, which found most acute expression in the condition of agency for the proletariat, as a symptom, to be worked through. Thus Marx thought that only the self-transcendence of the historical form of humanity exemplified by the proletariat (and the value of commodified labor its economic and social-political activity mediates), through its “self-abolition,” could allow for the (further) self-transformation of humanity in freedom. The existence of the proletariat is the problem to be overcome to further the advance of freedom.

The dialectic of myth and enlightenment: the linear and the cyclical

The problem of the possibilities for a “Marxist” philosophy of history as it was presented to Benjamin by 1940 is aptly captured by the opening aphorism to his essay “On the Concept of History” (AKA the “Theses”), on the chess-playing automaton. It should be quoted at length in order to be able to be addressed in detail:
There was once, we know, an automaton constructed in such a way that it could respond to every move by a chess player with a countermove that would ensure the winning of the game. . . . Actually, a hunchbacked dwarf — a master at chess — sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand. . . . One can imagine a philosophic counterpart to this apparatus. The puppet, called “historical materialism,” is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is small and ugly and has to keep out of sight.

One fundamental misreading needs to be addressed at the outset: This opening image is not favorable but critical. Benjamin was seeking to grasp how Marxism had become, in its “philosophy of history” of “historical materialism” an affirmative ideology of the course of history, an affirmation of the historical “progress” of capital. For the most important fact for Benjamin to address in 1940 was that the Marxist Left had not only not “won all the time” but had continuously lost its struggles. However this constant loss did not disturb Marxism’s sense of understanding the meaning of “history.” For Benjamin, this affirmative character of history demonstrated that the automaton of historical materialism was being motivated by a secret and occulted “theological” metaphysics.

What this “hidden theology” in Marxist “historical materialism” meant to Benjamin was the recrudescence of an affirmative sense of history in which everything that happened was captured by prior meaning, as in the ancient metaphysics of the cycle of time, in which the meaningfulness of everything that might happen was guaranteed
within the cosmology of religion. Everything has a precedent in the mythopoetics of history, which is really indistinguishable from legend or myth, and thus nothing could disturb the movement of time. What Benjamin detected in the “historical materialism” of Marxism-become-affirmative ideology of history was a form of enlightenment that had reverted to myth through a positive identification of the historical “progress” of capital with a progress in human freedom, which it obviously (by 1940) was not.

Benjamin thus articulated the affinity and axial identity of the two apparently contradictory ways temporality figured in modernity, the ways time appears to move under conditions of capital: the linear-progressive and the cyclical-recursive. We are all familiar with the colloquial choices of regarding temporality as either “one (damned) thing after another” or a matter of “the more things change the more they remain the same.” Rather than taking the side of a traditional-ancient metaphysics of the cycle of time, the preservation of meaning in change, or the “modernist” one of linear progress that expires the past and consumes the present, Benjamin demonstrated how they were both aspects of one and the same dynamic, both were partially true and one-sidedly false. The danger of a one-sided view of history, of taking either side in the antinomy of temporal meaning under capital, is what Benjamin later in the essay calls “becoming a tool of the ruling classes,” of producing an affirmative philosophy of history. For “progressive” historical optimism is the new mythology of capital and is conservative-reactionary no less than Romantic melancholy and historical pessimism more traditionally associated with negativity about modernity. Benjamin was no Romantic but
neither was he a “progressive” in his view of history, rather he sought a more adequate imagination of emancipation beyond the temporality of capital, beyond the abstract-homogeneous progress of time and the concrete re-instantiation of its resistance or arrest in mocking repetition. For what both betray is recognition of the historical possibility of freedom, which under capital’s temporal dynamic needs to be understood not only as the freedom to progress (in unfolding possibilities of qualitative difference and multiplicity) but also freedom from progress (escaping the further elaboration of the ever-same). Just as for Nietzsche nature had become history, at its expense as a source for life, so now for Benjamin history had become nature, at the expense of freedom.

Benjamin sought to complicate this affirmative antinomy of capital’s temporality, of repetition through progress, and progress through repetition, with the figure of “regression:” by disputing the character of progress with the specter of a continual regressive counter-movement that “progress” unwittingly sustains; and by revealing the way recursive repetition is only deceptively restorative and static and actually a progress in destruction. In doing so, Benjamin makes use of various images that demonstrate the “spatialization of time and temporalization of space” Lukács observed as a feature of the “reification” of the commodity form. Benjamin’s imagery of “dialectics at a standstill” finds its complement in his invocation of a “Messianic time” that is as homogeneous as the temporality of capital.

In one of the “Paralipomena” to “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin wrote that,
Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on the train — namely, the human race — to activate the emergency brake.

This tension between revolution as imparting motion and arresting it is found in one of the aphorisms of “On the Concept of History” on the “tiger’s leap:”

“Origin is the goal” (Karl Kraus).

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [Jetztzeit]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a by-gone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger’s leap into the past. Such a leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution.

The image of the “leap” is a spatial rendering of time, a rendering of temporal moment as place. To leap off the train of history is the same as to try to stop it in its tracks.

With the Kraus quotation “Origin is the goal,” recursive-cyclical time is invoked. The monumental history communicating across time is paradoxically ambivalent in the
case of the French Revolution and Rome: it is the source of both its emancipatory and affirmative character. Revolutionary France “repeated” Rome so as to go beyond it, and in so doing finally put a definitive end to the prior Classicist sense of historical lineage that its enlightened conception of a better society consummated. In the repetition, history was both fulfilled and thrown askew. This is the content of the “tiger’s leap into the past,” which is both, ambivalently, progressive and recursive. The spiraling cycle of history can go either way, towards a re-instantiation of the present as a version of the past, or towards an escape from it, merely in the guise of the past, of the fulfillment and redemption of the past. This is what Benjamin means by a “time filled full by now-time,” which thus may be “homogeneous” but is not “empty,” so charged as to blast the continuum of history.

The invocation of “fashion” is similarly ambivalent. “Fashion” is either the degradation of the new to mere “innovation” in the sense of a “renovation” of the past, or it is potentially the finding of new “content” in an “old form,” a later fulfillment of a past potential that went unrealized in the past and so demanded future redemption.

The Social Democratic “conforming” to capital’s progress in history, a “positive” philosophy of history that had been reproduced in later (Stalinized) Communism, is for Benjamin the greatest danger for a Marxist “historical materialism.” Benjamin cited with irony the statement by the pre-WWI Social Democratic philosopher Joseph Dietzgen that “Every day, our cause becomes clearer and people get smarter,” which history by 1940 had made into a cruel mockery. Invoking the Hegelian conception of adequate (historical)
knowledge being a function of (the) self-overcoming (of the present), Benjamin wrote that,

The subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself. Marx presents it as the last enslaved class — the avenger who completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which has a brief resurgence in the Spartacus League [of Luxemburg and Liebknecht], has always been objectionable to Social Democrats. . . . The Social Democrats preferred to cast the working class in the role of redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren.

Luxemburg’s invocation of the leader of the Roman slave revolt Spartacus as the standard bearer for the most modern of revolutionary politics, a mythologization of what is essentially a politics of enlightened emancipation, Benjamin found favorable to a more adequate historical consciousness of the task of freedom, which is inseparable from the past sacrifices that helped to bring into being its present potential.

For Benjamin, the modernity of social life under capital represented a “tremendous abbreviation” of historical time:
“In relation to the history of all organic life on earth,” writes a modern biologist, “the paltry fifty-millennia history of homo sapiens equates to something life two seconds at the close of a twenty-four-hour day. On this scale, the history of civilized mankind would take up one-fifth of the last second of the last hour.” Now-time, which, as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation, coincides exactly with the figure which the history of mankind describes in the universe.

This “abbreviation” or compression of the potential with which the past is charged as present in the “time of the now” was itself a feature of the temporality of capital, which sought to consummate all of history in itself only to bring forth a further obstacle to freedom in the form of its temporality.

**Capital as basis for history: its beginning and end**

A famous phrase by Marx describes how, under capital, changes in the cultural and political, “subjective” “superstructure” occur more slowly than those of the “objective” socioeconomic “base,” which is constantly revolutionized according to a linear-progressive dynamic of a limitless drive of value maximization. Failing to recognize the key aspect of this phrase, about changes occurring “more slowly” in the “superstructure” than in the “base,” subsequent “Marxists” have generalized from the descriptive (and subordinate) imagery of “base” and “superstructure” as if this distinction was Marx’s
epistemological point. And mistaking Marx’s understanding of the relation of “political economy” to the totality of social life under capital, the further vulgarization of this mis-generalization has assumed that Marx was addressing a distinction between a more fundamentally “real” “economic” basis and a more “epiphenomenal” and arbitrary political and cultural sphere. But this loses Marx’s sense that concrete forms of material production in the economy are themselves “epiphenomenal” and subject to a more “fundamental” alienated temporal dynamic of the value-form in capital. Industrial production in factories etc. are not the fundamental reality of capital but rather its disposable effects as human beings have tried (and failed) to master its value dynamic.

In terms of concrete ways of life, the past two hundred years have seen more changes than the preceding millennia, and these changes have only accelerated from Marx’s time to the present. But such changes at a concrete level have translated not into greater but rather less human control and rational agency. Driving these changes at a concrete social level is a more abstract temporal dynamic that constantly outstrips the concrete ways that people attempt to cope with and master it. Between changing “superstructural” phenomena and the temporally dynamic “base” that grounds such changes, there is a certain “lag.” As Marx described in Capital, society dominated by this driving temporal dynamic develops not however in an accordingly linear way but rather in “fits and starts.” Capital reproduces itself through massive crises in which concrete ways of life — the ways human needs are met through “production” — that have been built up are razed to the ground only to be “revolutionized” and reconfigured yet again.
For Marx, this recurrence of the same crisis of value is also the reproduction of emancipatory possibilities, of opportunities to as Benjamin put it, apply the emergency brake on the locomotive of history that is the capital dynamic.

It is this incessantly dynamic field of “revolutions” in concrete ways of life, for which according to Marx “all that is solid melts into air,” that gives rise to a new and exacting consciousness of “history,” beginning in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Human beings living under the capital dynamic become tasked to try to make sense of these dramatic — and destructive as well as “productively” progressive — changes, to make sense of history and question whether and how human agency exists in and through history. The “Left,” to which this history first gave birth (in the French Revolution), is itself inextricably part of this historical dynamic, for which emancipation and enlightened consciousness are inseparably tied. The Left seeks to be the most adequate consciousness and effective action in service of fulfilling concrete emancipatory possibilities presented in the history of capital, while grasping the underlying dynamic as the greatest threat and so limit to the possibilities for further developing the social emancipation the capital dynamic makes possible in people’s concrete ways of life.

But such potential manifests itself in “uneven” and irregular ways, and so involves a non-linear consciousness of the “progress” of history. Subjectively, it is experienced as an accumulating pressure. As Benjamin wrote in “On the Concept of History,”
What characterizes revolutionary classes at their moment of action is the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode. This consciousness is itself symptomatic of the capital dynamic rather than its “antithesis;” consciousness rooted in concrete temporality cannot be opposed in an emancipatory manner to the “abstract” homogeneous time of capital. On the one hand, in the July Revolution [of 1830] an incident occurred in which this [historical] consciousness came into its own. On the first evening of fighting, it so happened that the dials of the clocktowers were being fired at simultaneously and independently from several locations in Paris. An eyewitness . . . wrote as follows: “Who would believe it! It is said that, incensed at the hour, / Latter-day Joshuas, at the foot of every clocktower, / Were firing on clock faces to make the day stand still”

The concept of history and Marxism

On the other hand, for Benjamin in “On the Concept of History,” the limitless archive of time became the mounting “wreckage” of “one single” limitless “catastrophe” that transfixed the gaze of the “angel of history,” thus guaranteeing further catastrophe because it “drives him irresistibly into the future” with his “back turned.” While the angel would like to stop and abrogate time, “to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed,” transforming what “appears before us” as a driving “chain of events”
into the accumulation of all past destruction into a culminating end of time, he cannot do this for us, for his “wings” are “caught” in the “storm” of “progress.”

A historical consciousness that placed its hopes in the spatialization of time would no better grasp emancipatory possibilities than one that placed its faith in the linear drive of the dynamic of capital, consuming the past and leaving it behind — evacuated of meaning. For the “angel of history” for which such a rendering of the past is not a human subject, but an occulted figure of alienated consciousness. It is no more a model of an enlightened relation to history than is a melancholic fixated on the past at the expense of an adequate openness to the present and future.

What Benjamin offered was not an opposition of regression to progress but a necessary corrective to a mistaken and tragic identification with the aggression of the progressive dynamic of modern life and its incessant transformations. For melancholia is not really about the past but rather the present and its problems, for which the past offers a grasp and way to cope, as well as an indication of the failed mastery it expresses. Benjamin sought to make the demands that consciousness of history presents symptomatic in the sense of what Adorno, after Benjamin, called “consciousness of suffering.”

For just as the concept of freedom is inadequate if understood as an achieved state rather than as a tasking dimension of movement in transition to further transformation, there is a complementarily more profound understanding of suffering as not merely the experience of harm but the constraint on possibility, the experience of unfulfilled
potential. Just as the concept of freedom for the Left needs to be grasped in terms of “the ought,” what could be rather than what is, so is the concept of suffering that requires redemption needed to preserve its memory. Otherwise past suffering could be safely — and, according to Nietzsche, happily — forgotten in the service of life. But since life in modernity is subject to a new form of temporality, we require not the unhistorical but the supra-historical, the transcendence of (modern) historical time on its own basis, from within its own dynamic.

Benjamin sought to inextricably tie the concept of freedom, the pursuit of a progressive opening of further possibility, to the concept of suffering, the felt awareness of unfulfilled potential that demands redemption. As he had laid out in the “Theologico-Political Fragment” of 1920, the direction of realization of happiness finds its paradoxically countervailing, but productively “assisting” principle in the “Messianic” direction of redemption, in which the fulfillment of time finds its marriage in the desire to bring the time of eternal passing-away that happiness finds in “good fortune” to an end. Although such a metaphysics of history had its origins in an ancient basis of meaning in a cycle of time, Benjamin found its new saliency as a needed corrective in the paradoxically linear and recursive temporality of capitalist modernity. After the historical failures of Marxism, the memory of freedom, as unfulfilled potential remaining to be realized, could be found not so much in the desire for and faith in progress than in the longing for redemption and the demand that the “progress” of capital come to a halt.

As Adorno wrote in “Finale,” at the close of Minima Moralia (1944-47),
The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all [historical] things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of [their potential] redemption. . . . But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.

This was no displacement of the demand for emancipation but rather its preservation. For only in emancipation could the past suffering of humanity be “forgotten” and thus potentially properly remembered, not as transfixing paralysis but as the honor due to the sacrifice that made an emancipated future possible — and necessary. For Adorno, following Benjamin, in the aftermath of failed revolution the apparent futility of the struggle for emancipation beyond capital — the apparent progressive obsolescence of the Marxism — threatened to consume the sense that suffering needed to be confronted and thus freedom — from the pathology of unfulfilled potential — realized. Only thus could authentic redemption be achieved, through adequate action in the present, including the thought that seemed equally blocked, against the melancholically resigned fixation on the past or the mania of blind nihilistic progress in a runaway future that takes its place.

A sense of history that remains cognizant of both the potential for freedom and the suffering that results from its constraint, of the struggle for happiness and the redemption of its cruelest disappointments, of a present that is structured by past failures, is what Benjamin and Adorno sought in their “negative” philosophy of history, which was neither an enchantment nor a disenchantment of progress, but the consciousness of
the regression involved in the “progress” which is none, and the memory that it might have been and so yet could be otherwise.
2. Capital in history

It was often stated but not fully comprehended that Marx recognized the historical mission of the “class-conscious proletariat,” to overcome capitalism and to thus do away with “class society” *tout court*. Traditionally, this was taken to mean, however paradoxically, either the end of the “pre-history” or the beginning of the true history.¹ For

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¹ As Moishe Postone put it, in his May 2008 interview with Timothy Brennan for *South Atlantic Quarterly* (“Labor and the Logic of Abstraction,” *SAQ* 108.2 [Spring 2009] 305–330),

> The condition for the abolition of class society—which I mean in the very general sense of a society in which the many create an ongoing surplus that is appropriated by the few (and which, in this general sense, has characterized most human societies since the so-called neolithic revolution)—is the abolition of the necessity of the direct labor of the many as a condition of surplus production. This possibility, according to Marx in the *Grundrisse*, is generated by capital itself. . . .

I think it is unquestionable that some sort of interaction of humans with nature is a condition of human life. I do think, however, that one can question today whether that necessarily entails the physical labor of the many. There is a passage—I believe it is in the introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*—where Marx refers to history until now, including capitalism, as “prehistory.” My reading of this passage is that, beginning with the so-called neolithic revolution, there has been an enormous expansion of human productive capacity. This expansion, however, has always been at the cost of the many. All so-called historical forms of society are based upon the existence of an ongoing surplus, and that surplus has always been created by the many. . . .

I said after the “neolithic revolution.” This is not the case, to the best of my knowledge, with hunters and gatherers. Generally, historical refers only to post-neolithic societies. This development may have been a giant step for humanity as a whole, but it certainly was a negative step for a lot of people. The problem with historical societies is not only that an upper class oppresses and lives off those who produce the surplus, but also that the good of the whole and the good of each (or, at least, of most) are opposed. The growth and development of social productivity may benefit or be ripped off by an upper class, but the real problem is that the toil of the many is the condition for the wealth and culture of the whole. I think that, for Marx, capitalism could be the last form of prehistory, because it creates the conditions whereby an ongoing surplus could exist that wouldn’t depend on the labor of the many. This ties in to what you were saying about both theories of intellectual labor and postindustrial society. The problem with both kinds of approaches, which are related, is that they then abstract from capitalism. They see it simply in terms of technological development and then can’t understand the actual overarching trajectory of development. What is powerful about Marx’s approach is that he sees both continued oppression and its growing non-necessity for society as a whole. He analyzes the real oppression of people in a condition where it is no longer necessary. That, in a way, makes it worse. . . .

If capitalism is seen only as something negative—an oppressive, exploitative system that converts quality into quantity (which, I agree, does describe important aspects
Adorno and Benjamin, with Marx the phenomenon of capital was recognized completely unprecedented in the history of humanity, hence, any struggle for emancipation beyond capital was also completely unprecedented. While there was a connection between the unprecedented nature of the emergence of capital in history and the struggle to get beyond it, this was also misleading, to a false symmetry between the transition into and within different periods of the transformations of capital and the potential transition beyond this history. The revolt of the Third Estate, which initiated a still on-going and not yet exhausted modern history of bourgeois-democratic revolutions, was both the ground for, and, from Marx’s perspective, the potentially historically obsolescent social form of politics from which proletarian socialist politics sought to depart, to get beyond.

Famously, in the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels stated that all history hitherto has been the history of class struggles; Engels added a clever footnote that specified “all written history.” Later, in the 1942 “Reflections on Class Theory,” Adorno, following Benjamin’s 1940 “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” wrote that such a conception by Marx and Engels was in fact a critique of all of history, a critique of history itself. So in what way does the critique of history matter in the critique of capital?

The problem with the commonplace view of capitalism as primarily a problem of exploitation is that it is in this dimension that capital fails to distinguish itself from other...
forms of civilization. With Marx circa 1848 came the realization that bourgeois society, along with all its categories of subjectivity including its valorization of labor, might itself be transitional, that the end-goal of humanity might not be found in the productive individual (of the species homo faber and homo economicus) of bourgeois theory and practice, but that this society might point beyond itself, towards a potential qualitative transformation at least as profound as that which separated the peasant way of life from the urban/“bourgeois”-“proletarian” one, indeed a transition more on the order of profundity of the Neolithic Revolution in agriculture that ended hunter-gatherer society 10,000 years previously, that is, more profound than that which separated “modern” from “traditional” society. What would it mean to treat Marx’s entire project, then, as, first and foremost, a recognition of the history of modern, bourgeois society tout court as one of the pathology of transition, from the class society that emerged with the agricultural revolution 10,000 years ago and the civilizations based on an essentially peasant way of life, through the emergence of the commodity form of social mediation and a working class-based society, to the global civilization of the 19th century dominated by capital, towards a form of humanity that might lie beyond this?

According to Benjamin and Adorno, what was urgently needed was the acute awareness of the modern historical epoch as well as of the fleeting moment now, within it: What was it about the 20th century moment that might make the possibility of recovering Marx’s social and political consciousness viable, and how could such consciousness be advanced it by way of recovering it. For the pathology of modern
society mediated by capital, of the proletarianized bourgeois form of social life and its self-objectifications, the new forms of society it made possible, completely unprecedented in history, seemed to grow only worse the longer delayed were the possible and necessary steps to the next levels of the struggle for freedom. The pathology grew worse, not merely in terms of the various forms of the destruction of humanity, which in the 20th century were staggering, but also, perhaps more importantly — and disturbingly — in the manifest worsening social conditions and capacities for practical politics, and the worsening theoretical awareness of them. In Benjamin and Adorno’s time, the possibility of an *epochal* transition, in, through and beyond capital, was forgotten, while not having ceased to share this moment, but only having lost sight of its necessities and possibilities. Any prospective emancipatory politics, then, must necessarily have regained such awareness of the *transitional* nature of capitalist modernity and of the reasons why such a steep price for failing to recognize this was paid in the 20th century.

**History as phenomenon of domination**

What is new in capital is social *domination*, which must be distinguished both logically and historically, structurally and empirically, from exploitation, to which it is not reducible. Social domination means the domination of society by capital. This is what is *new* about capital in the history of civilization; prior forms of civilization knew overt domination of some social groups over others, but did not know as Marx recognized in
capital a social dynamic to which all social groups — all aspects of society as a whole — are subject.

An initial historical demarcation can be drawn approximately 10,000 BCE, with the origins of civilization and class society, when the great agricultural revolution of the Neolithic Age took place, and human beings went from living as nomadic hunter-gatherers to becoming settled agriculturalists. The predominant mode of life for humanity went from the hunter-gatherer to the peasant, and was this for most of subsequent history. Indeed, the pre-Neolithic era, the Paleolithic, was regarded by not only Marxists but also thinkers of the bourgeois era as “pre-historic.”

In the modern era, however, a similarly profound transformation began, in which the predominant mode of life has gone from agricultural peasant to urban worker: wage-earner, manufacturer, and industrial producer. With the Industrial Revolution in the late-18th to early-19th centuries, certain aspects of this “bourgeois” epoch of civilization and society manifested themselves and threw this history of the emergence of modernity into a new light. Rather than an “end of history” as bourgeois thinkers up to that time had imagined, modern social life entered into a severe crisis that fundamentally problematized the transition from peasant- to worker-based society. Bourgeois society, according to Marx, underwent the “crisis of capital.”

With Marx in the mid-19th century, after the Industrial Revolution, came the realization that bourgeois society, along with all its categories of subjectivity including its valorization of labor, might itself be transitional, that the end-goal of humanity might not
be found in the productive individual of bourgeois theory and practice, but that this society might point beyond itself, towards a potential qualitative transformation at least as profound as that which separated the peasant way of life from the urban "proletarian" one, indeed a transition more on the order of profundity of the Neolithic Revolution in agriculture that ended hunter-gatherer society approximately 10,000 years previously, more profound than that which separated modern from traditional society.

At the same time that this modern, bourgeois society ratcheted into high gear by the late-18th century, it entered into crisis, and a new, unprecedented historical phenomenon was manifested in political life: the Left. While earlier, pre-modern forms of politics certainly disputed values, this was not in terms of historical “progress,” which indeed became the hallmark of the Left. The Industrial Revolution of the early 19th century, the introduction of machine production, was accompanied by the new optimistic and exhilarating socialist utopias suggested by these developments, pointing to fantastical possibilities expressed in the imaginations of Fourier and Saint-Simon, among others.

Marx regarded the society of “bourgeois right” and “private property” as indeed already resting on the social constitution and mediation of labor, from which private property was derived, and asked the question of whether the trajectory of this society, from the revolt of the Third Estate of the 17th and 18th centuries and the manufacturing era in the 18th century, to the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, indicated the possibility of a further development.
In the midst of the dramatic social transformations of the 19th century in which, as Marx and Engels put it in the *Manifesto*, “all that was solid melted into air,” as early as 1843 (in his critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*), Marx prognosed and faced the development of the proletarianization of society, and asked whether and how humanity in proletarian form might liberate itself from this condition, whether and how, and with what necessity the proletariat would “transcend” and “abolish itself.” As early as the 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx recognized that mid-19th century socialism (of Proudhon et al.) was itself symptomatic of capital: proletarian labor was constitutive of capital, and thus its politics was symptomatic of how the society conditioned by capital might reveal itself as transitional, as pointing beyond itself. In struggling for the property and rights of labor against capital, bourgeois society was reinforced, if at a deeper and perhaps more obscure level. This was Marx’s most fundamental point of departure, that proletarianization was a substantial social problem and not merely relative to the bourgeoisie, and that the proletarianization of society was not the overcoming of capital but its fullest realization, and that this — the proletarianized society of capital — pointed beyond itself.

Thus, with Marx, a philosophy of the history of the self-alienation of emancipatory politics (the Left) was initiated. For Marx was not a socialist or communist so much as a thinker who tasked himself with understanding the meaning of the emergence of proletarian socialism in history. Marx was not simply the best or most consistent or radical socialist, but rather the most historically, and hence “critically,” self-
aware. By “scientific” socialism, Marx understood himself to be elaborating a form of knowledge aware of its own conditions of possibility, if symptomatically so.

For a Hegelian and hence Marxian clarification of the specificity of the modern problem of social freedom, however, it became manifest that the Left must define itself not sociologically, whether in terms of socioeconomic class or a principle of collectivism over individualism, etc., but rather as a matter of consciousness, specifically historical consciousness, of potential transformation. starting with Marx (following Hegel), it is consciousness of history and historical potential and possibilities, however apparently utopian or obscure, that distinguished the Left from the Right, not the struggle against oppression, which the modern Right might also claim. From the perspective, the Right did not represent the past but rather the foreclosing of possibilities in the present.

For this reason, it was important to recognize the potential and fact of regression that the possibilities for the Left in theory and practice suffered as a result of the abandonment of historical consciousness in favor of the immediacies of struggles against oppression. This is what raised the problem of the meaning of history itself for Benjamin and Adorno. Marx’s critique of symptomatic socialism, from Proudhon, Lassalle, Bakunin, et al., to his own followers in the new German Social-Democratic Party and their program at Gotha (as well as in Engels's subsequent critique of the Erfurt Programme), was aimed at maintaining the original vision of the post-Industrial Revolution crisis of the 1840s corresponding to the horizon of possibility of post-capitalist and hence post-proletarian society.
Unfortunately, already beginning in Marx’s own lifetime, the form of politics Marx sought to inspire began to fall well below the threshold of this critically important consciousness of history. And the vast majority of this regression took place precisely in the name of “Marxism” itself. Throughout the history of Marxism, from the disputes with the anarchists in the 1st International Workingmen’s Association, and disputes in the 2nd Socialist International, to the subsequent splits in the ostensibly Marxist socialist workers’ movement with the Bolshevik-led Third, Communist International of the 1920s and the Trotskyist Fourth International of the 1930s, a sometimes heroic but, in retrospect, overwhelmingly tragic struggle to preserve or recover something of Marx’s initial point of departure for modern proletarian socialism took place.

By the middle of the 20th century, developments regressed so far behind the original Marxian self-consciousness that Marxism itself became an affirmative ideology of industrial society, and the threshold of post-capitalist society became obscured, finding expression only obtusely, in various recrudescent utopian ideologies, and, finally, with the 1960s New Left, with the growing prevalence of “anarchist” ideologies and Romantic rejections of modernity, to which Adorno responded by referring simply to Marx’s original critiques of these.

Beyond this early 20th century crisis and passage into oblivion of a specifically Marxist approach, the Left itself, which emerged prior to Hegel and Marx’s attempts to philosophize its historical significance, had virtually disappeared by the mid-20th century. The resulting inability to distinguish conservative-reactionary from progressive-
emancipatory responses to the problems of society conditioned by capital was inseparable from the decline and disappearance of the social movement of proletarian socialism for which Marx had sought to provide a more adequate and provocative self-consciousness at the time of its emergence in the 19th century.

Paradoxically, as Lukács, following Luxemburg and Lenin, had already pointed out, in ways deeply influential for Benjamin and Adorno, while the apparent possibility of overcoming capital approached in certain respects, in another sense it seemed to retreat infinitely beyond the horizon of possibility. Benjamin and Adorno following him asked how it might be possible to follow Luxemburg’s early recognition, in Reform or Revolution?, of the opportunism that always threatened, but not as a kind of selling-out or falling from grace, but rather as the manifestation of the very real fear that attends the dawning awareness of what grave risks were entailed in trying to fundamentally move the world beyond capital?

What was worse, prior to any danger of “opportunism,” was the coarsening if not utter disintegration and obliteration of the ability to grasp and attempt to transform capital through working-class politics. Attending this was the coarsening of the ability to even recognize and apprehend, let alone adequately understand, social reality: society became increasingly “opaque.” For Benjamin and Adorno, Marxism did not suffer simply from opportunism but from a rather more basic disorientation: the problem not of “changing” the world but more fundamentally of understanding it.
Regarding Marxism, had it become a “utopia”? If so, what of this? What was the significance of our “utopian” sense of human potential _beyond_ capital and proletarian labor? Was it a mere dream? This is what motivated Benjamin, in _The Arcades Project_, to reinvestigate pre-Marxist socialism, specifically the pre-Marxian “utopians.”

Marx began with utopian socialism and ended with the most influential if spectacularly failing modern political ideology, “scientific socialism.” At the same time, Marx provided an acute and incisive critical framework for grasping the reasons why the 19th and 20th centuries have been, by far, the most tumultuously _transformative_ but also _destructive_ epoch of history, why this period promised so much and yet disappointed so bitterly. The 19th and 20th centuries saw more, and more profound changes, than prior millennia did. Marx attempted to grasp the reasons for this. Others failed to properly recognize the difference and tried, rather, to re-assimilate modern history back into its antecedents. (In the wake of the 1960s New Left, after Adorno’s time, for instance, this resulted in characteristic postmodernist illusions of an endless medievalism, as in Bruno Latour’s 1993 book _We Have Never Been Modern_.)

Benjamin and Adorno asked: What would it mean to treat the entire Marxist project as, first and foremost, a recognition of the history of modernity _tout court_ as one of the _pathology of transition_, from the class society that emerged with the agricultural revolution 10,000 hence and the civilizations based on an essentially peasant way of life, through the emergence of the commodity form of social mediation, to the present global civilization dominated by capital, towards a form of humanity that might lie beyond this?
With Marx, history was faced with a self-consciousness of an obscure and mysterious historical task, which can only be further clarified theoretically through transformative practice: the practice of “proletarian” socialism. But this task was abandoned in favor of what are essentially capital-*reconstituting* struggles, attempting to cope with the vicissitudes of the dynamics of modern history. But this re-assimilation of Marxism back into ideology characteristic of the revolt of the Third Estate meant the loss of the true horizon of possibility that motivated Marx and gave his project meaning, purchase and urgency.

Benjamin and Adorno attempted to follow Marx and the best historical Marxists who had followed him in recognizing the forms of discontent in bourgeois society grown pathological in capital as being themselves symptomatic of and bound up with the very problem against which they raged. Was it possible to avoid the premature post-capitalism and bad, reactionary utopianism that attended the death of Marxism in theory in practice, and preserve and fulfill the tasks given by history? Was it possible to properly recognize the breadth and depth of the problem to be overcome without retreating into wishful thinking and ideological gracing of the accomplished fact, and apologizing for impulses that only seem directed against the status quo, at the expense of what might lie beyond the traps of the suffering of the present?
3. Beyond history?

History is a way the present relates to itself. History mediates the present, and anticipates the future. The relation of past and present in history is a social relation, a relation of society with itself, as a function of change. The proper object of the present is history: the present is historical; it is constituted by history. The present is history; history is the present. As Hegel put it, the “philosophical” approach to history is concerned with the “eternally present:” what in the past was always present. This is a function of modernity.

What is at issue is the form of the present in history, or, the form of history in the present.

Three writings, by Nietzsche, Benjamin and Adorno, respectively, reflect upon the specific form of history in capital, and on the possibility of transcending the historicism that emerged in the 19th century, as it continued to inform the 20th:


Nietzsche’s essay inspired Benjamin’s; Adorno’s followed directly upon Benjamin’s.

Nietzsche and the genesis of history

Nietzsche’s second “untimely meditation” (or “unfashionable observation”), “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” critiqued what translator and Nietzsche scholar Peter Preuss called the 19th century “discovery” of history. Nietzsche regarded history specifically as a symptomatic expression of the genuine needs of the time. For Nietzsche, the symptom of history is expression of an illness, but Nietzsche’s approach to such
illness is as to “pregnancy:” not to be cured in the sense that it is eliminated, but rather undergone successfully to bring forth new life.

19th century historicism was, for Nietzsche, the hallmark of a historically peculiar form of life: modern humanity. Modern humanity is historical in a precise sense: “history” is historical. For Nietzsche, the question is what the symptom of history indicates about the need for humanity to overcome itself in present form. Nietzsche’s expression for this potential self-overcoming of historical humanity is the “supra-historical.” It points beyond history, towards a new form of life that is possible in history.

For Nietzsche, there are three forms of the historical: the “monumental;” the “antiquarian;” and the “critical.” Nietzsche addressed these different phases of the historical as expressing different “uses” or needs for the historical in the “life” of humanity. In each of them the past figures differently. The forms of the historical are distinguished from the greater three categories with which Nietzsche’s essay is concerned: the “unhistorical;” the “historical;” and the “supra-historical.” The latter three categories refer, respectively, to the pre-human, the human, and the supra-human. Humanity becomes itself through history; and it potentially overcomes or transforms itself in transcending itself as historical. As Preuss pointed out, history is the record of the “self-production” of humanity. Therefore, the transformation of humanity, the changes in its self-production, changes history, and changes what the past is for humanity. In this respect, it is possible to address Nietzsche’s essay as indicating the possibility for going
beyond the historical, or overcoming the present relation humanity has to itself, in and through history.

**Benjamin and Adorno on Nietzsche and Marxism**

Benjamin, and Adorno following him, appropriated Nietzsche’s account of history for their Marxist critical theory of the “philosophy of history,” specifying Nietzsche’s symptomology of history as symptomatic of *capital*. For Benjamin and Adorno, Nietzsche’s account of history was historically specific to its moment of capital, the late 19th century, with further implication for the 20th century.

What would it mean to get “beyond history?” First, it is necessary to identify, as Adorno put it, “what history is:” its possibility and necessity. For Benjamin, history originates in the demand for *redemption*. Following Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” and responding to Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto*, in “Reflections on Class Theory” Adorno wrote that,

> According to [Marxian] theory, history is the history of class struggles. But the concept of class is bound up with the emergence of the proletariat. . . . By exposing the historical necessity that had brought capitalism into being, political economy became the critique of history as a whole. . . . All history is the history of class struggles because it was always the same thing, namely, prehistory.
This gives us a pointer as to how we can recognize what history is. From the most recent form of injustice, a steady light reflects back on history as a whole. Only in this way can theory enable us to use the full weight of history to gain an insight into the present without succumbing in resignation to the burden of the past.

This relation of pre-history, history, and a potential post-historical condition was, for Adorno, the relation of the present to the “burden of the past:” can it be redeemed?

Adorno addressed a certain problem in Marxism’s so-called “dialectical” approach to history, in that it tended to be, paradoxically, one-sided:

[Marxism has been praised] on account of its dynamism. . . . Dynamism is merely one side of dialectic: it is the side preferred by the belief in practicality. . . . The other, less popular aspect of dialectic is its static side. . . . The law that, according to the Hegelian dialectic, governs the restlessly destructive unfolding of the ever-new consists in the fact that at every moment the ever-new is also the old lying close at hand. The new does not add itself to the old[,] but is the old in distress.

This was Adorno’s interpretation and attempted further elaboration of Benjamin’s injunction to read history “against the grain” (Thesis VII). But what did Adorno mean by “the new?”

Potential futures are generated out of the relation of past and present, out of the relation of the present to itself through history. The dynamic of history is inherent in the
self-contradiction of the present: history is a projection of it. What is the “practicality” of history? The emergence or departure of the new is the self-overcoming of the present, or the self-overcoming of history: its immanent transcendence. Nietzsche’s phrase, “self-overcoming” is, literally, the “Selbstaufhebung;” self-fulfillment and self-negation. The present provides an opportunity for the self-overcoming of history.

The “new is the old in distress” because it is the present in tension with itself: is the present merely the ever-same? The “static side of the dialectic,” in which the “ever-new is the old lying close at hand,” means that, as Benjamin put it, “every second is the strait gate through which the Messiah [redemption] might enter” (Addendum B). The “homogeneous” and “empty” time of the ever-same is also, potentially, the “full” time-of-the-now (Jetztzeit). History is dialectical, but it is a “negative” dialectic of the present: the present, in its potential for self-overcoming, disintegrates as history disintegrates into the mere facticity of the past. Historicism is a symptom of failed self-overcoming. For Benjamin, the task was to “construct” history, rather than to merely “add” the new to the old (Thesis XVII). This is the contrast Adorno found between the new as “the old lying close at hand” and the “restlessly destructive unfolding of the ever-new” that is “always the same thing, namely, prehistory.” The “static side” of the dialectic of history is thus a resource. The question is whether it is a resource for the emergence of the new or the perpetuation of the old: either, or both.
Nietzsche’s “untimeliness”

The discontent of history is the source of Nietzsche’s “untimely thought.” What potential critique of the present does history offer? Nietzsche recognized himself as a product of 19th century historicism. Nietzsche characterized as “antiquarian” the deadly transformation of history into the mere facticity of the past. As a Classical philologist, Nietzsche was well prepared to address the melancholy of modernity expressed in historicism. As Benjamin put it, quoting Flaubert, “Few people can guess how despondent one has to be in order to resuscitate Carthage” (Thesis VII). (The reference to Carthage echoes that with which Nietzsche began his essay, the Ceterum censeo [“I judge otherwise”] of Cato the Elder: “Carthago delenda est [Carthage must be destroyed].” As Nietzsche put it, this was the spirit with which his “consideration of the worth and the worthlessness of history” began.) In response to such threatening acedia, Nietzsche contrasted his “critical” approach to history.

Here it becomes clear how badly man needs, often enough, in addition to the monumental and antiquarian ways of seeing the past, a third kind, the critical: and this again in the service of life as well. He must have the strength, and use it from time to time, to shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live: this he achieves by dragging it to the bar of judgment, interrogating it meticulously and finally condemning it; every past, however, is worth condemning.
This approach, Nietzsche pointed out, was counter to the historicist passion of his time, the prevalent “consumptive historical fever.” Nevertheless, Nietzsche found his own philological concerns to motivate a certain dissatisfaction with the ethos inherent in “the powerful historical tendency of the times, as it has been, by common knowledge, observed for the past two generations, particularly among the Germans” since the early 19th century.

I must be allowed to ascribe this much to myself on account of my profession as a classical philologist, for I would not know what sense classical philology would have in our age unless it is to be effective by its inappropriateness for the times, that is, in opposition to the age, thus working on the age, and, we hope, for the benefit of a coming time.

The consummation and self-destruction of 19th century historicism in Nietzsche presented the demand for the “supra-historical,” for getting beyond the historical comportment that had produced Nietzsche, a self-overcoming of history.

**Beyond history?**

The question of getting beyond history relates to Nietzsche’s characterization of “critical history,” that is, the possibility and necessity of “condemning a past” in creating what he called a “new nature.” This is the need to forget. This is not the forgetting that might be taken to characterize the unhistorical, animal condition (according to Nietzsche, the unhistorical condition is that of the grazing animal, which does not speak because it
immediately forgets what it was going to say). “Forgetting,” in Nietzsche’s sense, is an activity in service of life: it can only be considered, not unhistorical, but post- or supra-historical, that is, a form of historical forgetting that overcomes a form of remembering. There is a human need to forget that is not natural but develops: it is a new need.

For Benjamin, the need to “forget” is related to the need to “redeem” history. “Redeemed” history could not only be potentially “cited” in “all its moments,” but also, more importantly, forgotten. The need to remember is matched by the need to forget. So, the question turns on the necessity for remembering that would need to be overcome, in order to make forgetting, in a transcendent sense, possible and desirable.

Benjamin’s concept of historical redemption in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” was informed by the correspondence he conducted with Horkheimer on the Arcades Project (for which the “Theses” were drafted as an introduction), specifically concerning redemption. Horkheimer pointed out that any redemption must be qualified: the dead remained dead; their sacrifice could not be redeemed in certain respects. For Benjamin, this affected the quality of history: it became the record of wasted potential, or “barbarism.” This was history’s standing reproach to the present.

If, for Nietzsche, “critical history” means standing in judgment over history, by contrast, for Benjamin, the critical value of history was in its judgment over the present: history was an effect of the present’s judgment of itself. What does the present need to remember; what to forget? What does it need to judge? If Nietzsche called for the historian to be “man enough” to judge the past, for Benjamin, the required “strength” was
to receive history’s judgment and not be devastated by it: the memory of “enslaved ancestors” (Thesis XII). For the nature and character of both the ancestry and the enslavement were precisely the matters to be judged, remembered and forgotten. From what are we descended, and from what must we free ourselves? How do we judge this?

**Capital as form of history to be redeemed**

Adorno identifies “how we can recognize what history is” by the “steady light” reflecting “from the most recent form of injustice.” The theory that is thus enabled, without succumbing to the past, must be able to distinguish the potential for the present to depart from the “ever-same.” For Benjamin, this “Messianic” potential for redemption available in every present moment is the product of two opposed vectors: regression and stasis. The “static side” of the historical dialectic that Adorno identified was, for Benjamin, the potential “exploding” of the “continuum of history” (Thesis XVI), a “standstill” (Thesis XVI), or “activating the emergency brake on the locomotive of history” (Paralipomena Thesis XVIIa). The motivation for this was the “regression of society” (Thesis XI). Otherwise, one might “succumb,” “in resignation to the burden of the past.”

Capital presents an apparently unredeemable history, at least in any traditional (theological) sense of redemption. Benjamin was no melancholic but rather sought to diagnose and potentially overcome the melancholy of modernity. But this could only be achieved immanently, from within modernity’s “dialectic” of history. This dialectic had, for Adorno, two sides: dynamic and static. The dialectic of history in capital is one of
constantly generated but wasted new potentials. This is its “injustice,” what gives modernity its peculiar, specific melancholy, affecting its demand for redemption. While all of human history may have been characterized by the Messianic demand for redemption, modern history’s demand for redemption is specific and peculiar. Modern history liquidates all prior history, however rendering it, according to Benjamin, more as “rubble” (Thesis IX) than as resource.

Modern history ruins prior forms of redemption, in favor of what is, for Benjamin, a specious form of remembering: history as the accumulation of mere facts. What would be its “opposite?” The traditional Messianic eschatological “end of time” is matched by the modern “monstrous abbreviation” that summarizes the entire history of humanity (Thesis XVIII) in capital: an appropriation of all of history that threatens to become its barbarization. For Benjamin, this must be countered by a constructed “constellation,” in which the demand for the redemption of history transforms the time of the present into one of potential secular redemption: not the negation of time as in the coming of the Messiah, but the redemption of time, in time (Addendum A). This would amount to the effective transformation of history, a “fulfillment” of the “here-and-now” appearing as a “charged past” that has the ability to “leap into the open sky of history” (Thesis XIV), as opposed to subordination to a “chain of events” (Thesis IX) or “causal nexus” (Addendum A). Neither celestial redemption outside of time nor secular time without redemption, Benjamin’s philosophy of history seeks the relation of modern temporality to the transformed demand for redemption.
The question is how to overcome the ideological abuse of history to which it is subject in modernity. This abuse is due to the form of temporality in capital. For Benjamin, this concerns the “citability” of the moments of the past, which modern society makes possible — and necessary. This is no mere addition to knowledge of the past, a quantitative increase, but rather the fundamental qualitative transformation of what counts as historical knowledge, the self-knowledge of humanity as a function of time. Is the self-production and self-transformation of humanity a function of time? In capital, this is the case, but in a certain sense, producing what Benjamin called a “causal chain” of events “anterior” to the present. However, such spatialization of time, once, historically, did not, and so, potentially, would no longer, pertain in a “supra-historical” condition for humanity, as prognosed by Nietzsche.

The temporality of capital

From the transformation of time in time, it becomes possible to turn the “abbreviation” of time in capital into the potential supersession of the form of change as a function of time. From Nietzsche’s “critical” approach to history, as an active appropriation of the present, Benjamin turned to the reception of history as critical to the present: the present as crisis of history. Where, for Nietzsche, the culmination of history was the crisis of the historical, and the possibility for a supra-historical form of humanity, for Benjamin, the culmination of the peculiar historical comportment of modern humanity is the crisis of history, the crisis of humanity. All of history becomes citable, but as amalgamation.
Where, for Nietzsche, a future changed condition “must come” if humanity is to survive, for Benjamin, if history is to be redeemed, humanity must be transformed. (Benjamin: “Humanity is preparing to outlive culture, if need be;” this is Nietzsche’s “strange goal.”)

As Adorno concluded his “Reflections on Class Theory,” “This means, however, that dehumanization is also its opposite. . . . Even if the dynamic at work was always the same, its end today is not the end.” The transformation of humanity envisioned by Benjamin and Adorno, appropriating Nietzsche’s discontent in history, was one that would transcend all historical culture “hitherto.” Benjamin and Adorno matched Nietzsche’s “rumination” with Marx and Engels’s Manifesto. The self-overcoming of the entire history of civilization and of its “process of transmission” (which cannot be avoided but only “reversed,” pointing not to the future but the past) would be “against the grain” of the historical progress that can only be regarded as “regression:” the inversion of the meaning of history; the end of history as the end of pre-history in the present, or, the potential redemption of the history of civilization that capital makes possible of itself.

The dialectic of memory and forgetting involves changes in both the forms of remembering and the process of forgetting. A form of remembrance is a way of forgetting. It serves a certain way of life. To remember is to forget in a certain way; to forget is to overcome a certain need to remember, and to overcome the past in a certain way. If the present is an effect of history, then it is in the way the past causes the present.

Why is the past, in modernity (according to Benjamin, following Nietzsche), “citable” in all of its moments? Because all of history is (potentially) negated by capital
— just as it is (potentially) fulfilled by it. The question is the possibility and necessity of the appropriation of all of history in capital. The mode of appropriation of the past in capital, its “process of transmission,” is the society prevailing throughout “all of history:” “barbarism.” This means that all moments of the past potentially become culpable in capital, by becoming the endless resource of the present: history. Capital is the literal “Aufhebung” of history. But can capital become the Selbst-aufhebung of history? Or does modern history exhibit, rather, a dynamic that is alien to all of history, as it was practiced hitherto (prior to the challenge of modernity)? Is capital the potential for redemption in history, or its ultimate denial, its final liquidation? The fundamental ambivalence of history in capital is the key to what it is: an injustice to be made good. This is what capital has promised humanity at the end of history. Could it be fulfilled?²

² This link between redemption and forgetting has its utopic as well as dystopic valences. As Kafka wrote in conclusion of his last published story, “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk” (in The Complete Stories, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir [New York: Schocken, 1995], 360–376), in a decidedly non-human, zoomorphic parable:

Josephine's road, however, must go downhill. The time will soon come when her last notes sound and die into silence. She is a small episode in the eternal history of our people, and the people will get over the loss of her. Not that it will be easy for us; how can our gatherings take place in utter silence? Still, were they not silent even when Josephine was present? Was her actual piping notably louder and more alive than the memory of it will be? Was it even in her lifetime more than a simple memory? Was it not rather because Josephine's singing was already past losing in this way that our people in their wisdom prized it so highly?

So perhaps we shall not miss so very much after all, while Josephine, redeemed from the earthly sorrows which to her thinking lay in wait for all chosen spirits, will happily lose herself in the numberless throng of the heroes of our people, and soon, since we are no historians, will rise to the heights of redemption and be forgotten like all her brothers. (376)
Chapter VI. Psychology

Adorno and Freud

Adorno’s Habilitationsschrift was on Kant and Freud. It ended with Marx. Why did Adorno think that Marx addressed the problems of both Kantian and Freudian accounts of consciousness?

The distinction between Kant and Freud turns on the psychoanalytic concept of the “unconscious,” the by-definition unknowable portion of mental processes, the unthought thoughts and unfelt feelings that are foreign to Kant’s rational idealism. Kant’s “critical” philosophy was concerned with how we can know what we know, and what this revealed about our subjectivity. Kant’s philosophical “critiques” were investigations into conditions of possibility: Specifically, Kant was concerned with the possibility of change in consciousness. By contrast, Freud was concerned with how conscious intention was constituted in struggle with countervailing, “unconscious” tendencies: how the motivation for consciousness becomes opaque to itself. But like Kant, Freud was not interested in disenchanting but rather strengthening consciousness.

For both Kant and Freud, the greater possibilities for human freedom are to be found in the conquests of consciousness: To become more self-aware is to achieve greater freedom, and this freedom is grounded in possibilities for change. The potential for the qualitative transformation of consciousness, which for both Kant and Freud includes affective relations and hence is not merely about “conceptual” knowledge, underwrites both Kantian philosophy and Freudian psychotherapy.
But both Kantian and Freudian accounts of consciousness became utopian for Adorno. Adorno’s Marxist “materialist” critique of the inadequacies of Kant and Freud was concerned with redeeming the desiderata of their approaches to consciousness, and not simply “demystifying” them. For Adorno, what Kant and Freud both lacked was a critical theory of capital; a capacity for the self-reflection, as such, of the subjectivity of the commodity form. Marx provided this. For Adorno, both Kant and Freud were liable to be abused if the problem of capital was obscured and not taken as the fundamental historical frame for the problem of freedom that both sought to address. What was critical about Kantian and Freudian consciousness could become unwittingly and unintentionally affirmative of the status quo, as if we were already rational subjects with well-developed egos, as if we were already free, as if these were not our tasks. This potential self-undermining or self-contradiction of the task of consciousness that Adorno found in Kant and Freud could be explicated adequately only from a Marxian perspective. When Adorno deployed Freudian and Kantian categories for grasping consciousness, he deliberately rendered them aporetic. Adorno considered Kant and Freud as providing descriptive theories that in turn must be subject to critical reflection and specification—within a Marxian socio-historical frame.

For Adorno, the self-opacity of the subject or, in Freud’s terms, the phenomenon of the “unconscious mental process,” is the expression of the self-contradiction or non-identity of the “subject” in Hegelian-Marxian terms. Because Kantian consciousness is not a static proposition, because Kant was concerned with an account of the possibility of
a self-grounded, “self-legislated” and thus *self-conscious* freedom, Adorno was not arraying Freud against Kant. Adorno was not treating Kant as naïve consciousness, but rather attending to the historical separation of Freud from Kant. Marx came between them. The Freudian theory of the unconscious is, for Adorno, a description of the self-alienated character of the subjectivity of modern capital. Freud can be taken as an alternative to Marx—or Kant—only the degree to which a Marxian approach fails to give adequate expression to historical developments in the self-contradiction of the subjectivity of the commodity form.

One thinker usually neglected in accounts of the development of Frankfurt School Critical Theory is Wilhelm Reich. For Adorno, perhaps the key phrase from Reich is “fear of freedom.”¹ This phrase has a deeper connotation than might at first be apparent, in that it refers to a dynamic process and not a static fact of repression. “Repression,” in Freud’s terms, is *self*-repression: it constitutes the self, and hence is not to be understood as an “introjection” from without. The potential for freedom itself produces the reflex of fear in an intrinsic motion. The fear of freedom is thus an index of freedom’s possibility. Repression implies its opposite, which is the potential transformation of consciousness. The “fear of freedom” is thus grounded in freedom itself.

Reich derived the “fear of freedom” directly from Freud. Importantly, for Freud, psychopathology exists on a spectrum in which the pathological and the healthy differ not in kind but degree. Freud does not identify the healthy with the normal, but treats both as

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species of the pathological. The normal is simply the typical, commonplace pathology. For Freud, “neurosis” was the unrealistic way of coping with the new and the different, a failure of the ego’s “reality principle.” The characteristic thought-figure here is “neurotic repetition.” Neurosis is, for Freud, fundamentally about repetition. To free oneself from neurosis is to free oneself from unhealthy repetition. Nonetheless, however, psychical character is, for Freud, itself a function of repetition. The point of psychoanalytic therapy is not to eliminate the individual experience that gives rise to one’s character, but rather to allow the past experience to recur in the present in a less pathological way. This is why, for Freud, to “cure” a neurosis is not to “eliminate” it but to transform it. The point is not to unravel a person’s psychical character, but for it to play out better under changed conditions. For it is simply inappropriate and impractical for a grown person to engage adult situations “regressively,” that is, according to a pattern deeply fixed in childhood. While that childhood pattern cannot be extirpated, it can be transformed, so as to be better able to deal with the new situations that are not the repetition of childhood traumas and hence prove intractable to past forms of mastery. At the same time, such forms of mastery from childhood need to be satisfied and not denied. There is no more authoritarian character than the child. What are otherwise “authoritarian” characteristics of the psyche allow precisely these needs to be satisfied. “Guilt,” that most characteristic Freudian category, is a form of libidinal satisfaction. Hence its power.

Perhaps the most paradoxical thought Reich offered, writing in the aftermath of the 1933 Nazi seizure of power, was the need for a Marxist approach to attend to the
“progressive” character of fascism.” “Progressive” in what sense? Reich thought that Marxism had failed to properly “heed the unconscious impulses” that were otherwise expressed by fascism. Fascism had expressed the emergence of the qualitatively new, however paradoxically, in the form of an apparently retrograde politics. Reich was keen to point out that fascism was not really a throwback to some earlier epoch but rather the appearance of the new, if in a pathological and obscured form. Walter Benjamin’s notion of “progressive barbarism” similarly addressed this paradox, for “barbarism” is not savagery but decadence.

Reich thought that learning from Freud was necessary in the face of the phenomenon of fascism, which he regarded as expressing the failure of Marxism. It was necessary due to Freud’s attention to expanding and strengthening the capacity of the conscious ego to experience the new and not to “regress” in the neurotic attempt to master the present by repeating the past. Freud attended to the problem of achieving true, present mastery, rather than relapsing into false, past forms. This, Freud thought, could be accomplished through the faculty of “reality-testing,” the self-modification of behavior that characterized a healthy ego, able to cope with new situations. Because, for Freud, this always took place in the context of, and as a function of, a predominantly “unconscious” mental process of which the ego was merely the outmost part and in which were lodged the affects and thoughts of the past, this involved a theory of the transformation of consciousness. Because the unconscious did not “know time,” transformation was the realm of the ego-psychology of consciousness.
For Reich, as well as for Benjamin and Adorno, from the perspective of Marxism the Freudian account of past and present provided a rich description of the problem of the political task of social emancipation in its subjective dimension. Fascism had resulted from Marxism’s failure to meet the demands of individuals outpaced by history. Reich’s great critique of “Marxist” rationalism was that it could not account for why, for the most part, starving people do not steal to survive and the oppressed do not revolt.

By contrast, in the Freudian account of emancipation from neurosis, there was both a continuity with and change from prior experience in the capacity to experience the new and different. This was the ego’s freedom. One suffered from neurosis to the degree to which one shielded oneself stubbornly against the new. This is why Freud characterized melancholia, or the inability to grieve, as a narcissistic disorder: it represented the false mastery of a pre-ego psychology in which consciousness had not adequately distinguished itself from its environment. The self was not adequately bounded, but instead engaged in a pathological projective identification with the object of loss. The melancholic suffered not from loss of the object, but rather from a sense of loss of self, or a lack of sense of self. The pathological loss was due to a pathological affective investment in the object to begin with, which was not a proper or realistic object of libidinal investment at all. The melancholic suffered from an unrealistic sense of both self and other.

In the context of social change, such narcissism was wounded in recoil from the experience of the new. It thus undermined itself, for it regressed below the capacities for
consciousness. The challenge of the new that could be met in freedom becomes instead
the pathologically repressed, the insistence on what Adorno called the “ever-same.”
There is an illusion involved, both of the emergently new in the present, and in the image
of the past.² But such “illusion” is not only pathological, but constitutive: it comprises the
“necessary form of appearance,” the thought and felt reality of past and present in
consciousness. This is the double-movement of both the traumatically new and of an old,
past pathology. It is this double-movement, within which the ego struggles for its very
existence in the process of undergoing change within and without that Adorno took to be
a powerful description of the modern subject of capital. The “liquidation of the
individual” was in its dwindling present, dissolved between past and future. The modern
subject was thus inevitably “non-identical” with itself. Reich had provided a
straightforward account of how accelerating social transformations in capital ensured that
characteristic patterns of childhood life would prove inappropriate to adult realities, and

². See Robert Hullot-Kentor, Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno (New
York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 83:
[Siegfried] Kracauer . . . pointed out [in his review of Adorno’s Kierkegaard:
Construction of the Aesthetic] that . . . [Adorno’s] methodology derived from the concept
of truth developed by Benjamin in his studies of Goethe and the Baroque drama: “In the
view of these studies [i.e., Benjamin’s] the truth-content of a work reveals itself only in
its collapse. . . . The work’s claim to totality, its systematic structure, as well as its
superficial intentions share the fate of everything transient, but as they pass away with
time the work brings characteristics and configurations to the fore that are actually
images of truth.” This process could be exemplified by a recurrent dream: throughout its
recurrences its images age, if imperceptibly; its historical truth takes shape as its thematic
content dissolves. It is the truth-content that gives the dream, the philosophical work, or
the novel its resilience. This idea of historical truth is one of the most provocative
rebuttals to historicism ever conceived: works are not studied in the interest of returning
them to their own time and period, documents of “how it really was,” but rather
according to the truth they release in their own process of disintegration.
that parental authority would be thus undermined. Culture could no longer serve its ancient function.

Freud’s account of the “unconscious mental process” was one salient way of grasping this constitutive non-identity of the subject. Freud’s ego and id, the “I” and “it” dimensions of consciousness, described how the psychical self was importantly not at one with itself. For Adorno, this was a description not only of the subject’s constraint but its potential, the dynamic character of subjectivity, reproductive of both a problem and a task.

In his 1955 essay “Sociology and Psychology,” Adorno addressed the necessary and indeed constitutive antinomy of the “individual” and “society” under capital. According to Adorno, there was a productive tension and not a flat contradiction between approaches that elaborated society from the individual psyche and those that derived the individual from the social process: both were at once true and untrue in their partiality. Adorno’s point was that it was inevitable that social problems be approached in such one-sided ways. Adorno thus derived two complementary approaches: critical psychology and critical sociology. Or, at a different level, critical individualism and critical authoritarianism. Under capital, both the psychical and social guises of the individual were at once functionally effective and spurious delusional realities. It was not a matter of properly merging two aspects of the individual but of recognizing what Adorno elsewhere called the “two torn halves of an integral freedom to which however they do
not add up.” It was true that there were both social potentials not reducible to individuals and individual potentials not straightforwardly explicable from accounts of society.

The antagonism of the particular and the general had a social basis, but for Adorno this social basis was itself contradictory. Hence there was indeed a social basis for the contradiction of individual and society, rather than a psychical basis, but this social basis found a ground for its reproduction in the self-contradiction of the psychical individual. A self-contradictory form of society gave rise to, and was itself reproduced through, self-contradictory individuals.

The key for Adorno was to avoid collapsing what should be critical-theoretical categories into apologetic or affirmative-descriptive ones for grasping the individual and society. Neither a social dialectic nor a split psyche was to be ontologized or naturalized, but both required historical specification as dual aspects of a problem to be overcome. That problem was what Marx called “capital.” For Adorno, it was important that both dialectical and psychoanalytic accounts of consciousness had only emerged in modernity. From this historical reality one could speculate that an emancipated society would be neither dialectical nor consist of psychological individuals, for both were symptomatic of capital. Nevertheless, any potential for freedom needed to be found there, in the socially general and individual symptoms of capital, described by both disciplines of sociology and psychology.

Hence, the problem for Adorno was not a question of methodology but of critical reflexivity: how did social history present itself through individual psychology (not
methodological individualism but critical reflection on the individuation of a social problem). The “primacy” of the social, or of the “object,” was, for Adorno, not a methodological move or preferred mode of analysis, let alone a philosophical ontology, but was meant to provoke critical recognition of the problem he sought to address.

In his speech to the 1968 conference of the German Society for Sociology, titled “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?,” Adorno described how the contradiction of capital was expressed in “free-floating anxiety.” Such “free-floating anxiety” was expressive of the undermining of what Freud considered the ego-psychology of the subject of therapy. Paranoia spoke to pre-Oedipal, pre-individuated problems, to what Adorno called the “liquidation of the individual.” This was caused by and fed into the further perpetuation of authoritarian social conditions.

For Adorno, especially as regards the neo-Freudian revisionists of psychoanalysis as well as post- and non-Freudian approaches, therapy had, since Freud’s time, itself become repressive in ways scarcely anticipated by Freud. Such “therapy” sought to repress the social-historical symptom of the impossibility of therapy. Freud had commented on the intractability of narcissistic disorders such as melancholia, but these had come to replace the typical Freudian neuroses of the 19th century such as hysteria. The paranoiac-delusional reality of the authoritarian personality had its ground of truth, a basis, in society. The “fear of freedom” was expressed in the individual’s retreat from ego-psychology, a narcissistic recoil from an intractable social reality. Perhaps this could be recognized as such. This, for Adorno, was the emancipatory potential of narcissism.
In his essay “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda” (1951), Adorno characterized the appeal of fascist demagogy precisely in its being recognized by its consumers as the lie that one chooses to believe, the authority one spites while participating in it by submitting to it in bad faith. This was its invidious power, the pleasure of doing wrong, but also its potential overcoming. An antisocial psychology, not reducible to the sociopathic, had been developed which posed the question of society, if at a different level than in Freud’s time. It was no longer situated in the “family romance” of the Oedipal drama but in society writ large. But this demanded recognition beyond what was available in the psychotherapeutic relationship, because it spoke not to the interaction of egos but to projective identification among what Freud could only consider wounded narcissists. For Adorno, we are a paranoid society with reason.

There had always been a fine line between therapy, providing for an individual’s betterment through strengthening the ego’s “reality principle,” and adaptation to a bad social reality. For Adorno, the practice of therapy had come to tip the balance to adaptation—repression. The critical edge of Freudian psychoanalysis was lost in its unproblematic adoption by society—in its very “success.” Freudian psychoanalysis was admitted and domesticated, but only the degree to which it had become outmoded. Like so much of modernism, it became part of kitsch culture. This gave it a repressive function. But it retained, however obscurely, a “utopian” dimension: the idea of being an ego at all. Not the self constituted in interpellation by authority, but in being for-itself.
After Freud, therapy produced, not problematic individuals of potential freedom, but authoritarian pseudo-individuals of mere survival. For Freud it was the preservation of the individual’s potential for self-overcoming and not mere self-reiteration that characterized the ego. For Adorno, however, the obsolescence of Freudian ego-psychology posed the question and problem of what Adorno called “self-preservation.” For Adorno, this was seen in individuals’ “unworthiness of love.”

If psychoanalytic therapy had always been above all pragmatic, had always concerned itself with the transformation of neurotic symptoms in the direction of better abilities to cope with reality, then there was always a danger of replacing neuroses with those that merely better suited society. But if, as Freud put it early on (in “The Psychotherapy of Hysteria,” in *Studies on Hysteria*), as a result of psychotherapy the individual finds herself pressing demands that society has difficulty meeting, then that remained society’s problem. It was a problem for the individual, but not simply of or “with” the individual. Freud understood his task as helping a neurotic to better equip herself for dealing with reality, including, first and foremost, social realities—that is, other individuals. Freud recognized the challenge of psychoanalysis. It was not for Freud to deny the benefits of therapy even if these presented new problems. Freud conceived psychical development as an open-ended process of consciousness in freedom.

The problem for Adorno was how to present the problem of society as such. Capital was the endemic form of psychology and not only sociology. What was the psychological basis for emancipatory transformation? For the problem was not how the
individual was to survive society, but rather how society would survive the unmet
 demands presented by its individuals—and how society could transfigure and redeem the
 suffering, including psychically, of individual human beings. These human beings
 instantiated the very substance of that society, and they were the individuals who
 provided the ground for social transformation.

 An emancipated society would no longer be “sociological” as it is under capital,
 but would be truly social for the first time. Its emancipated individuals would no longer
 be “psychological,” but would be truly “individual” for the first time. They would no
 longer be merely derivative from their experience, stunted and recoiled in their
 narcissism. In this sense, the true, diverse individuation, what Adorno called
 “multiplicity,” towards which Freudian psychoanalytic therapy pointed, could be
 realized, freed from the compulsions of neurotic repetition, including those of prevailing
 patterns of culture. At the same time, the pathological necessity of individual
 emancipation from society would be overcome. Repetition could be non-pathological,
 non-repressive, and elaborated in freedom. The self-contradiction of consciousness found
 in the Freudian problematic of ego-psychology, with its “unconscious mental process”
 from which it remained alienated, would be overcome, allowing for the first time the
 Kantian rationalism of the adequately self-aware and self-legislating subject of freedom
 in an open-ended development and transformation of human reason, not as a cunning
 social dialectic, but in and through individual human beings, who could be themselves for
 the very first time.
Chapter VII. Art

1. Critical theory of art

The scholar of Benjamin and Adorno’s work Susan Buck-Morss, in her response to the *October* art journal’s 1996 Visual Culture Questionnaire, provided a pithy formulation for defining the tasks of both art and criticism in the modern era, “[Artists’] work is to sustain the critical moment of aesthetic experience; our job as critics is to recognize this.”

Two aspects of Buck-Morss’s formulation of the work of artists need to be emphasized, “sustaining the critical moment” and “aesthetic experience.” The subjective experience of the aesthetic is what artists work on. And they do so in order to capture and sustain, or make available, subjectivity’s “critical moment.”

Adorno, in his 1932 essay on “The Social Situation of Music,” analogized the position of modern art to that of critical social theory. The role of both was to provoke recognition. Furthermore, Adorno warned that there can be no progress in art without that of society. Adorno’s posthumously published but unfinished monograph *Aesthetic Theory* can be considered to have a central theme organizing all its discussion of the modern experience of art, the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of art. In this, Adorno was elaborating in the aesthetic realm his thesis in *Negative Dialectics*, the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of philosophy and critical theory. What does it mean to practice art in an epoch of its simultaneous continuing necessity and impossibility? A clue can be found in Adorno’s claim in *Negative Dialectics*, that “philosophy lives on because its moment of realization was missed.”
Philosophy of art

Adorno’s treatment of philosophy and art are modeled on Marx’s treatment of capital. The potential for a dialectical historical transformation, in which capital would be simultaneously realized and abolished, became for Adorno the question of what it would mean to simultaneously realize and overcome the aspirations of modern philosophy and art. What would it mean to overcome the necessity that is expressed in modern practices of art? The Hegelian thought-figure of art’s attaining to its own concept while transcending it, through a qualitative transformation, was mobilized by Adorno to grasp both the history of modern art and the desire to overcome its practices.

The Hegel scholar Robert Pippin, in his response to the 2003 Critical Inquiry journal’s forum on the current state and potential future for critical theory, described postmodernism as a repetition of the “Romantic recoil” from modernity. Specifically, Pippin pointed to modern literary and artistic forms as derived from such Romanticism, of which postmodernism was the mere continuation, but in denial of its repetition. But Pippin also pointed out that such repetition is in fact a “regression,” because consciousness of the historical condition of the problem had grown worse.

Hegel had posed the question of the “end” of art. But Hegel meant by this not the cessation of practices of art, but rather their ability to make the activity of “Spirit” appear in a self-contained manner. While religion had been superseded by art, art had come to be superseded by “philosophy.” What did Hegel mean by this? Nothing but that art needed
philosophical interpretation to be able to mean what it meant. Art needed criticism in order to be itself. This was a specifically modern condition for art, which Hegel addressed in a rather optimistic manner, seeing such need for criticism in art as a hallmark of enlightenment rather than a disability of art.

But Adorno took this Hegelianism of art and turned it, from a historical explanation of its condition, into a critique of such circumstances of history. Like Marx who had “turned Hegel on his head,” Adorno inverted the significance of Hegel’s philosophical observation. Where Hegel had, for instance, regarded modern politics as the realm of reflection on, the self-objectification of civil society in the state, Marx regarded the modern state and civil society distinction as expressing the pathological necessity of capital, in which the self-contradiction of capital was projected. Adorno similarly addressed the complementary necessities of art and criticism, as expressing a self-contradiction in (aesthetic) subjectivity.

But, as Adorno put it, this did not mean that one should aspire to a “reconciliation” of art and philosophy or theory. Just as Marx critiqued the Left Hegelians for their Romantic desire to dissolve the distinction between state and “civil” society, the separation was regarded, by Marx and Adorno alike, as the hallmark of freedom. In a late essay, “Marginalia on Theory and Practice” (1969), Adorno attacked “Romantic” socialism for wanting to dissolve the distinction and critical relationship between theory and practice, maintaining that, by contrast with traditional society, the modern separation of theory and practice was “progressive” and emancipatory. So was
the separation in meaning between art, as “non-conceptual knowledge,” and criticism, informed by “theoretical” concepts.

**Artistic modernism**

So Adorno, like Marx, looked forward, not to a return to a pre-modern or pre-capitalist unity of theory and practice and reconciliation of form and content, as had been the case in traditional culture, but a qualitative transformation of the modern division of meaning in art and criticism, in which each would be simultaneously realized and abolished, as presently practiced. The problem is that, rather than being raised to ever more acute levels, already in Adorno’s time there was a retreat from the productive antagonism, the dialectic of theory and practice, or art and criticism.

Adorno drew upon and sought to further elaborate the approach of his friend and mentor Walter Benjamin, who argued, in his 1934 essay “The Author as Producer,” that no art could be of correct political “tendency” unless it was also of good aesthetic “quality.” Furthermore, Benjamin argued that every great work of art “either founds or dissolves a genre.” As Benjamin put it, the work of art that fails to teach artists teaches no one. Artists do not “distribute” aesthetic experience but produce it. New art reworks and transforms retrospectively the history of art. Benjamin argued that there can be progress in society without that of art, for necessarily involved in both is the transformation of subjectivity.
Politics of art

The history of modern art, as Benjamin and Adorno recognized, presents a diverse multiplicity of practices, none of which have been able to come to full fruition. Benjamin described this poignantly in his *Arcades Project* as “living in hell.” Benjamin and Adorno’s thought-figure for such historical consciousness of modern art comes from Trotsky, who pointed out, in a 1938 letter to the editors of the American journal *Partisan Review*, that the modern capitalist epoch displayed the following phenomenon in its historical course:

> [N]ew tendencies take on a more and more violent character, alternating between hope and despair. The artistic schools of the [first] few decades [of the 20th century] — cubism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism — follow each other without reaching a complete development. Art, which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected, suffers most from the decline and decay of bourgeois society.

This was because, as Trotsky put it,

> The decline of bourgeois society means an intolerable exacerbation of social contradictions, which are transformed inevitably into personal contradictions, calling forth an ever more burning need for a liberating art. Furthermore, a declining capitalism already finds itself completely incapable of offering the minimum conditions for the development of
tendencies in art which correspond, however little, to our epoch. . . . The oppressed masses live their own life. Bohemianism offers too limited a social base.

Trotsky said of art that, “a protest against reality, either conscious or unconscious, active or passive, optimistic or pessimistic, always forms part of a really creative piece of work. Every new tendency in art has begun with rebellion.” And not merely rebellion against existing conventions of art, but the greater conditions for life in capitalist modernity.

So, what would be a “liberating art?” Adorno addresses this in terms of the aspiration for “artistic autonomy,” or the self-justification of aesthetic experience. This is related to how Kant had described the experience of the beautiful, in nature or art, as the sympathetic resonance the subject experiences of an object, which thus appears to embody “purposiveness without purpose,” or a telos, an end-in-itself. Except, for Adorno, this empathy between subject and object in Kant’s account of aesthetic experience, is not to be affirmative but critical. In Adorno’s account of the modern experience of art, the subject recognizes, not the power of experiential capacities, and the transformative freedom of the human faculties, but rather their constraint and unfreedom, their self-contradictory and self-undermining powers. The subject experiences not its freedom in self-transformation, but rather the need for transformation in freedom. Adorno emphasized that the autonomy of art, as of the subject, remains, under capitalism, an aspiration rather than an achieved state. Works of art embody the striving for autonomy that is denied the subject of the modern society of capital, and thus also embody failure.
Hence, the history of art furnishes a rich inventory of failed attempts. This is why its history is unsettled and constantly returns. Modern works of art are necessarily failures, but are nonetheless valuable as embodiments of possibility, of unfulfilled potential.

The constrained possibilities embodied in modern art are, according to Benjamin’s formulation, approached by the subject with a combination of “desire and fear.” Modern artworks embody not only human but “inhuman” potentials, or, the possibilities for the qualitative transformation of humanity. They thus have simultaneously utopian and dystopian aspects. Modern artworks are as ambivalent as the historical conditions they refract in themselves, “prismatically.” But it is in such ambivalence that art instantiates freedom. It is the task of theory, or critique, to register and attempt to bring the non-conceptual within the range of concepts. As Adorno put it, the aspiration of modern art is to “produce something without knowing what it is.” In so doing, art acts not only on the future, but also on history.

**Art history**

Modern artworks find inspiration in art history. This is the potentially emancipatory character of repetition. Artists are motivated by art history to re-attain lost moments by achieving them again, but differently. Artists produce new works that, in their newness, unlock the potentials of past art, allowing us to re-experience history. But this work on history is not without its dangers. As Benjamin put it, “even the dead are not safe” from the ambivalent “progress” of history, which unfolds in capital as a “mounting
catastrophe.” The history of modern art, like that of capital more generally, furnishes a compendium of ruins. The simultaneously progressive and regressive dynamics of the accumulation of history find their purchase in this, that historical forms of experience and consciousness inform present practices, for better or worse. It is the work of critique to attempt to better inform, through greater consciousness, the inevitable repetition in the continuing practices of art, and thus attempt to overcome the worst effects of the regression involved in such practices.

In the Hegelian sense adopted by both Marx and Adorno, the greater consciousness of freedom is the only available path for freedom’s possible realization. Consciousness is tasked to recognize the potential that is its own condition of possibility. This is why Adorno and Benjamin addressed works of art as forms of consciousness. Art can be ideological or it can enlighten, provoking consciousness to push itself further.

The dialectic of art and criticism is necessary for the vitality of art. The self-abnegation of criticism, the disenchantment of consciousness that characterized “postmodernism” has clearly demonstrated the barrenness of such abdication of responsibility, on the part of critics and theorists even more than artists, who were thus left at the mercy of poor, unclarified concepts. The challenge posed by modern critical-theoretical approaches to art have been warded off rather than engaged and pushed further.

Artists’ work continues to demand critical recognition, whether the “critics” recognize this or not. What such critical recognition, of the work of history take up by art,
would mean is what Marxist critical aesthetic theorists like Adorno and Benjamin pursued, and from whose efforts we can and indeed must learn. For a new condition of art has not been attained, but only an old set of conditions repeated, however without their being properly recognized. The relation between art and social modernity, or capital, continues to task both art and theory. Art is not merely conditioned by, but is itself an instance of the modern society of capital. But, like society, for art to progress, theory must do its work. “Postmodernist” art criticism, however, has proven disabling for such work.

**An incomplete project? Art and politics after postmodernism**

**What was postmodernism? — Habermas’s critique**

Postmodernism challenged the institutionalized modernism of the mid-20th century, offering more radical forms of social discontents and cultural practice. It meant unmasking the values of progress as involving ideologies of the political status-quo, the problems of which were manifest to a new generation in the 1960s. But, more recently, postmodernism itself has begun to age, and reveal its own concerns as those of the post-1960s situation of global capitalism rather than an emancipated End of History.

In 1980, Jürgen Habermas, on the occasion of receiving the Adorno prize in Frankfurt, predicted the exhaustion of postmodernism, characterizing its conservative tendencies. Habermas called this situation the “incomplete project” of modernity, a set of unresolved problems that have meant the eventual return of history, if not the return of
“modernism.” How does Habermas’s note of dissent, from the moment of highest vitality of postmodernism, help us situate the concerns of contemporary art in light of society and politics today?

In his Adorno prize talk, Habermas emphasized the question of the “aesthetic experience . . . drawn into individual life history and . . . ordinary life,” and “not [already] framed by experts’ critical judgments” (12–13). Habermas thinks that such aesthetic experience “does justice to . . . Brecht’s and Benjamin’s interests in how artworks, having lost their aura, could yet be received in illuminating ways,” a “project [that] aims at a differentiated re-linking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that [would be impoverished by mere traditionalism][, a] new connection [that] that can only be established on condition that societal modernization will also be steered in a different direction [than capitalism].” (13). Habermas admitted that “the chances for this today are not very good” (13).

Instead, Habermas points out at that, “The disillusionment with the very failures of those programs that called for the negation of art and philosophy has come to serve as a pretense for conservative positions” (13–14). This is how Habermas characterized postmodernism, an anti-modernism that was an ideology of the “young conservatives,” namely Foucault and Derrida (among others).

Habermas drew a parallel of the postmodernism of Derrida and Foucault to the “neo-conservatives,” for which he took the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists Horkheimer and Adorno’s former secretary, in their time of exile in the U.S. during
WWII, Daniel Bell, as representative. Bell had described the “cultural contradictions of capitalism” as resulting in what he called “antinomian culture,” which produced a nihilistic “culturati” in a “counterfeit” high culture of “multiples,” hedonism for the middle class, and a “pornotopia for the masses.” What Bell, as a self-styled “conservative,” deplored, such as the “conformism” of a liberal “heterodoxy” that became a “prescription in its confusions,” postmodernists celebrated. But they agreed on what Habermas called the destructive aspects of the “negation of art and philosophy,” against which various “hopeless” “Surrealist revolts” had been mounted, as an inevitable result of modernity. Whereas Bell, for instance, explicitly called for the return of religion as a way of staving off the nihilism of modernity, the postmodernists implicitly agreed with the conservative diagnosis of such nihilism, for they explicitly abandoned what Habermas called modernity’s “incomplete project” of enlightenment and emancipation. Postmodernism was a form of anti-modernity.

**Critical art, liquidated**

So, how does art figure in such a project of enlightened emancipation? As Buck-Morss wrote in her response to the premier postmodernist art journal *October*’s 1996 Visual Culture Questionnaire, “[Artists’] work is to sustain the critical moment of aesthetic experience. Our work as critics is to recognize it.” Buck-Morss protested against what she called the “liquidation” of art in the move of “attacking the museum,” “producing subjects for the next stage of global capitalism,” by replacing concern with the “critical
moment of aesthetic experience” with a discourse that “legitimizes culture.” In so doing, Buck-Morss pointed out that failing to properly grasp the social stakes of aesthetic experience resulted in the “virtuality of representation,” ignoring how, for Benjamin and the Surrealists he critically championed “images in the mind motivate the will” and thus have “effect in the realm of deeds.”

Indeed, prominent *October* journal writer Hal Foster had, in the 1982 essay “Re: Post,” gone so far as to call for going “beyond critique,” really, abandoning it, for in critique Foster found precisely the motor of (deplorable) “modernism,” which he characterized as consciousness of “historical moment” that “advanced a dialectic.” Foster stated unequivocally that critical “self-reflexivity” needed to be abandoned because it (supposedly) “enforces closure.” Foster called the Brechtian terms “defamiliarization” and “estrangement” “quintessentially modernist.” But Foster remained equivocal regarding the matter of art’s potential to “initiate new ways of seeing,” even if he stayed suspicious of “the old imperative of the avant-garde and its language of crisis.”

**The crisis of criticism — driving art underground**

But the concern, for Foster, as with the other leading *October* writers (such as Rosalind Krauss and Douglas Crimp), was reduced, from social problems, to problematizing *art*: (in Crimp’s words) “on the museum’s ruins.” But the museum is still standing. The question is whether it still houses art. As Buck-Morss pointed out, the museum is the “very institution that sustains the illusion that art exists.” What this means is that,
disenchanted with art, the “realm of deeds,” in which “images in the mind motivate the will,” abandoned by the critics, is ceded instead to the “advertising industry.” The museum, lacking a critical response, is not overcome as an institution of invidious power, but, instead of sustaining the socially necessary “illusion” that “art exists,” however domesticated, becomes an embodiment of the power of kitsch, that is, predigested and denatured aesthetic experience, to affirm the status-quo: high-class trash. Art becomes precisely what the postmodernists thought it was. The museum has not faced the crisis of meaning the postmodernists wished of it, only the meaning has become shallower. In Adorno’s terms, the museum has become an advertisement for itself, but the use of its experience has become occulted, in favor of its exchange-value: the feeling of the worth of the price of the ticket. But the experience of art is still (potentially) there, if unrecognized.

For Buck-Morss, there is indeed a crisis — of (lack of) recognition. Criticism, and hence consciousness of aesthetic experience objectified in artistic practices, was in crisis in postmodernism. Critical theory ceased to be critical — and thus became affirmative, even if it was confused about this. This was the result, in Habermas’s terms, of the “postmodernist” turning away from the “incomplete project” of modern art’s critical response to social modernity: a conservative result, by default, even if under the “pretense” that it was progressive or even radical.

Against such postmodernist abdication and thus affirmation of existing “culture,” Buck-Morss called for approaching art “emblematically and symptomatically, in terms of
the most fundamental questions of social life,” “bringing to consciousness what was
before only dimly perceived, so that it becomes available for critical reflection.”
Otherwise, Buck-Morss warned that “tomorrow’s artists may opt to go underground,”
and “do their work esoterically, while employed as producers of visual culture.” We
might also say that there is the option of continuing to make “art,” but without
recognition of its stakes by critics, impaired by a discourse of “visual culture” and
supposed “institutional” critique or opposition — that is, an institutionalized opposition
to the institution (such as effected by the October writers, who have since entered the
canon of academicism, for instance in the academic art of the postmodernist art school).
This outcome represses, or drives “underground,” the concerns of artists regarding
aesthetic experience, which, according to Habermas and Buck-Morss, following
Benjamin and Brecht, are potentially “vital” and “fundamental” to “questions of social
life.”

“Relational” aesthetics
The question of the more recent phenomenon (since the 1990s) of “relational aesthetics”
needs to be addressed in such terms, for “relational aesthetics” claims to be about
mobilizing attention to the aesthetic experience of the social for critical ends, in society
as well as art. Several important critical accounts of relational aesthetics have been
attempted. Claire Bishop has addressed the problem of relational aesthetics raising the
social at the expense of recognition of social antagonisms. Stewart Martin has questioned
the relational aesthetics opposition of the social to the (autonomous) art object of traditional (modernist) aesthetics. But Martin has also interrogated the hypostatization of the social, whether considered either as a relatively unproblematic value in itself or as a zone of antagonism, as in Bishop’s criticism. Additionally, Martin has addressed shared problems of the late paradigmatic but opposed attempts on the Left to politicize aesthetics by Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou. Martin has deployed a sophisticated understanding of Marx and Adorno on the commodity form towards these ends. Thus it becomes possible for Martin to address relational aesthetics practices’ “naïve mimesis or aestheticization of novel forms of capitalist exploitation,” in treating art as a “form of social exchange” that advocates an “inter-subjective art of conviviality” (370–371), as well as address the potential political stakes of various approaches to art. — Conversely, it becomes possible for Martin to address what he calls the otherwise naturalized “commodity form of the political” (372).

Martin is concerned to be able to preserve a social-critical approach to what he calls the “arty non-art of late capitalist culture.” It is necessary, according to Martin, to avoid the “Hegelian trap” of “harmonious rapprochement,” through a dialectic of “anti-art and pure art,” resulting in an “artification of the world” that however “breaks” with attempts to “critique bourgeois culture.” Instead, Martin recalls Adorno’s recognition that art’s “autonomy,” its simultaneously “anti-social” and “non-subjective” or “objective” aspect, was inherent both in its commodity character and in its “resistance to commodification,” through “immanent critique or self-criticism” (373). It is this aspect of
art, common to both “anti-art” and “pure art,” that, for Martin, “relational” aesthetics, with its emphasis on the supposedly “inter-subjective” character of the social, occludes.

**Historical temporality of artworks not linear succession**

John Roberts, in his recovery of Adorno, has focused as well on the “asocial” aspect of art as the potential source of its critical value. Roberts recovers the key idea, from Benjamin and Adorno, of artworks’ “pre-history” and “after-life” in history, in order to introduce the problem of the historical temporality of the experience of works of art, which is not reducible to their immediate aesthetic experience or the thoughts and feelings of the artists who produced them. Works of art are “objective” in that they are non-identical with themselves, in the sense of non-identity in time. In Adorno’s terms, artworks have a “historical nucleus,” a “truth-content” revealed only as a function of transformations in history. According to Benjamin, this is how artworks can gain stature and power with time.

The example Roberts uses is the late, delayed reception of early 20th century avant-garde artworks in the 1960s, which inspired artists. This is a very different account from the notion, common in postmodernist criticism, of artists rebelling against the preceding styles and art criticism and historical discourses of abstract expressionism. Artists may have remained innocent of the cloistered disputes of the art critics and historians, though their works were used as evidence in these disputes; and they may have remained more sympathetic to abstract expressionism as art than the postmodernist
critics were. The pendulum-swing or grandfather-rule accounts of the vicissitudes of history are inadequate to the non-linear temporality Roberts highlights.

Roberts discusses works of art as forms of “deferred action” in history, with which artists and viewers engage in new forms of art production and reception, which belie notions of successions of styles traditional to art history. This allows works of art to be understood as embodiments of objectified experience that change as a function of historical transformations, as potentially informing a proliferation of experiences unfolding in history, rather than, as Foster, for example, feared, forms of “closure.”

Neo-avant garde or neo-modernist?

It is important that neither Habermas (nor Bell) nor Buck-Morss accepted the idea that gained traction in the 1970s of a division between modernist and avant-garde art. For neither did Benjamin or Adorno. (Peter Bürger’s influential study, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, was, importantly, a critique of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* on this score.)

What Martin calls the “dialectic” of “anti-art” and “pure art” has continued, though not necessarily in terms of opposed camps, but rather in what Adorno recognized as the necessary element of the non-artistic in artworks. Now that postmodernism has been exhausted as a trend in criticism (as seen by significant reversals on the part of its standard-bearers such as Foster), it becomes possible to recognize how postmodernism reacted inadequately and problematically to this dialectic, conflating realms of art and social life, and thus repressed it, obscuring its operations from proper recognition.
The emergence of “relational” aesthetics in the 1990s marked the exhaustion of postmodernism, as both its culmination and its negation (it is significant that Foster was hostile, calling it a mere “arty party”), but also a terminal phase of the recrudescence of the problem of the social and of politics, long wandering lost through the postmodernist desert of the 1970s and ’80s, during which Adorno, for example, could only be received as an old-fashioned modernist. But, since the 1990s, critics and theorists have found it increasingly necessary to reconsider Adorno.

Today, which may be considered a post-postmodernist moment, art practices can be broadly grouped into two seemingly unrelated tendencies, neo-avant garde (such as in relational aesthetics) and neo-modernist (in the revival of the traditional plastic arts of objects such as painting and sculpture). The task would be to understand what these apparently independent tendencies in art have in common as phenomena of history, the society and politics with which art practices are bound up. Postmodernist art criticism has made it impossible to properly grasp such shared history of the present, hence its exhaustion today, leaving current art unrecognized.

But, in the midst of the high era of postmodernist criticism, Habermas sounded an important note of dissent and warning against this trend, reminding of what postmodernism left aside in terms of society and politics. For it is with respect to society and political ideology that art remained potentially vital and necessary, if under-recognized as such. In his Adorno prize talk, Habermas raised the problem of art as an exemplary task for the “critical intellectual.” This is because, as more recent critics such
as Bishop, Martin and Roberts have noted, art, in its dialectical transformations, allows for the recognition of *history*, the present as historical, revealing not only the history of art, but of modern capitalist society and its unfulfilled forms of discontent, as registered in aesthetic experience.
2. Adorno’s aesthetic theory

The new and freedom in art

Adorno’s work on aesthetics can be — and usually is — regarded in three different ways: as a musician (performer and composer) and critic of (especially 20th century) music; as a theorist and critic of the “culture industry” of 20th century artistic forms; and as a philosopher of aesthetics, specifically with respect to the experience of modern art. What such conventional approaches leave out, which is crucial for Adorno’s work, however, is the social theory of art. It is in this dimension that Adorno’s work is most obscure, but also most vital. As Adorno put it in the opening sentences of his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory*,

> It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist. The forfeiture of what could be done spontaneously or unproblematically has not been compensated for by the open infinitude of new possibilities that reflection confronts. In many regards, expansion appears as contraction. The sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out, did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure. Instead, the process that was unleashed consumed the categories in the name of that for which it was undertaken . . . absolute freedom.¹

Here, Adorno rehearsed a trope familiar from Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil*:

The child enthralled by lithographs and maps

... can satisfy his hunger for the world:

... how limitless it is beneath the lamp,

... and how it shrinks in the eyes of memory! [. . .]

One morning we set out. Our heart is full,

our mind ablaze with rancor and disgust —

we yield it all to the rhythm of the waves,

our infinite self awash in the finite sea. [. . .]

But only those who leave for leaving’s sake

are *travelers*; hearts tugging like balloons,

they never balk at what they call their fate

and, not knowing why, keep muttering “away!” . . .

... those whose longings have the shape of clouds,

... who dream — as conscripts dream of guns — of huge

... and fluctuating and obscure delights,

... none of which has ever had a name. [. . .]

... It is a bitter truth our travels teach!

Tiny and monotonous, the world

... has shown — will always show us — what we are:

... oases of fear in the wasteland of ennui! [. . .]

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Death, old admiral, up anchor now,
this country wearies us. Put out to sea!
What if the waves and winds are black as ink,
our hearts are filled with light. You know our hearts!
Pour us your poison, let us be comforted!
Once we have burned our brains out, we can plunge
to Hell or Heaven — any abyss will do —
deep in the Unknown to find the new!2

Unlike Baudelaire, however, Adorno’s account was not of the individual but of society and history. Nonetheless, it is significant that for both Baudelaire and Adorno the “inconceivable” or “Unknown” was the “absolute freedom” of the “new.” “Freedom,” a “sea” on which to set out, became, not an “adventure,” but the “abyss” into which an “infinite self” is “plunged” or “consumed.” The “finite sea,” was a “wasteland of ennui:” the “contraction” of a “tiny, monotonous world.” This double movement, of the “open infinitude of new possibilities” that end up “shrinking in the eyes of memory,” which, for Baudelaire, was an account of individual existence — life — for Adorno became, rather, the account of the “autonomy” of what “could be done spontaneously,” as it appeared in historical retrospect. The singular moment of fleeting possibility in the freedom of the new was grasped by Baudelaire and Adorno paradoxically, as both irremediably past and

yet still remaining suggestive of unfulfilled potential. Adorno did not share Baudelaire’s melancholy.

The passive voice in Adorno’s discourse is significant.³ The implied objectivity or collectivity is not that of the individual human beings, as it was for Baudelaire, but of works of art, in terms of the commodity. As Benjamin put it about Baudelaire, “The commodity itself is the speaker here.”⁴ Building upon Benjamin’s Arcades Project’s analysis of Baudelairean modernity in the Marxian terms of the commodity form, Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory arrives at the following crucial enunciation, under the title “Situation: The New: Its Philosophy of History:”

[S]ince the mid-nineteenth century and the rise of high capitalism, the category of the new has been central, though admittedly in conjunction with the question whether anything new had ever existed. . . . The new is necessarily abstract: It is no more known than the most terrible secret of

³ As Gillian Rose put it, in The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978),

It is impossible to understand Adorno’s ideas without understanding the ways in which he presents them, that is, his style, and without understanding the reasons for his preoccupations with style. It is, however, Adorno’s theory of society which determines his style, and that theory can only be understood if one knows how to read his texts. . . .

³ Adorno’s works are exemplars of negative dialectic, that is, they are informed by the idea that concepts, as ordinarily used, are distorting and mask social reality. Adorno thus had to find an alternative way of using concepts. . . . The question of communicating his ideas becomes the question of what the reader should experience when confronting the text. . . . As he tersely puts it, “Truth is objective, not plausible” (Negative Dialectics, 41). . . . Criticism and composition in Adorno’s works are thus inseparable. . . .

³ Adorno uses . . . stylistic strategies in the attempt to present the object of his thought and to “see beyond” the subject (Negative Dialectics, 376). [H]e uses impersonal and passive constructions . . . not attributed to “us.” (11–12)

Poe’s pit. Yet something decisive, with regard to its content, is encapsulated in the concept of the new. Toward the end of his life Victor Hugo touched on it in his comment that Rimbaud bestowed a *frisson* nouveau on poetry. The shudder is a reaction to the cryptically shut, which is a function of that element of indeterminacy. At the same time, however, the shudder is a mimetic comportment reacting mimetically to abstractness. Only in the new does mimesis unite with rationality without regression: *Ratio* itself becomes mimetic in the shudder of the new and it does so with incomparable power in Edgar Allen Poe, truly a beacon for Baudelaire and all modernity. The new is a blind spot, as empty as the purely indexical gesture “look here.” . . . The authority of the new is that of the historically inevitable. To this extent it implies objective criticism of the individual, the vehicle of the new: In the new the knot is tied aesthetically between individual and society. . . . The abstractness of the new is bound up with the commodity character of art. This is why the modern when it was first theoretically articulated in Baudelaire bore an ominous aspect. The new is akin to death. What adopts a satanic bearing in Baudelaire is the negative self-reflection of identification with the real negativity of the social situation. . . . *Nouveauté* is aesthetically the result of historical development, the trademark of consumer goods appropriated by art by means of which artworks distinguish themselves from the ever-
same inventory in obedience to the need for the exploitation of capital, which, if it does not expand, if it does not — in its own language — offer something new, is eclipsed. The new is the aesthetic seal of expanded reproduction, with its promise of undiminished plenitude. Baudelaire’s poetry was the first to codify that, in the midst of the fully developed commodity society, art can ignore this tendency only at the price of its own powerlessness. . . . Baudelaire neither railed against nor portrayed reification; he protested against it in the experience of its archetypes, and the medium of this experience is the poetic form. This raises him supremely above late romantic sentimentality. The power of his work is that it syncopates the overwhelming objectivity of the commodity character — which wipes out any human trace — with the objectivity of the work in itself, anterior to the living subject: The absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity.5

Subjectivity of the commodity form

Benjamin was concerned with the emergence and the decline or destruction of aura as a function of bourgeois subjectivity and its temporality of experience. The experience of the aura was indissolubly tied to the experience of its decline/destruction. It was an effect of melancholy: something passing took on the character of an image. This was

Benjamin’s response to the desideratum of Kantian aesthetics, that the subject should recognize its transcendental unity in apperception, the experience of its perception of the object, through which it could recognize itself. Melancholic subjectivity was, for Benjamin, disabled subjectivity, with respect to Kant. The attempt to hold fast to the object found its complement in the subject’s attempts to distract itself from itself. Benjamin is elaborating Nietzsche’s account of the “mechanical activity” of modern asceticism, a form of self-denial that nonetheless preserves (however perversely) the “will to power.” A distracted subject, for Benjamin, was not one failing to pay attention, but one that attended in a specific way, immersed in the experience, but distractedly. This paradoxical image came from Baudelaire, who, by contrast with the flâneur, did not take in the urban crowd as a contemplative spectacle (melancholically, like Hugo, Poe and Engels), but rather sought to dive into and lose himself in the crowd, with the empathy of the commodity. This was, according to Benjamin, “traumatophilia,” or identification with the aggression of the urban experience. The image of the gambler was paradigmatic: one who kills time as a way of coping with the modern experience of temporality, the attempt to void the passing moment, manically, as opposed to the melancholic who seeks to fix it (spatially).

The question for Benjamin was whether and how the liquidation of the individual subject of Kantian aesthetics could have a critical or even progressive-emancipatory character, what he called “progressive barbarism.” In “The Work of Art” essay, this took the (rather interpretively unfortunate) form of the opposition of “exhibition” to “cult” or
ritual value in artworks. Could the modern subject of “progressive barbarism” critically recognize itself in a state of distraction from itself, or only as a bourgeois subject in the Kantian sense of “transcendental apperception?” But this was precisely what seemed unavailable in actual practice. (The latter seemed fatally undermined, serving only as a bad-faith ideological mien, as in the Nazi misappropriation of Nietzsche.) Or was the only alternative in fact the melancholy of the bourgeois subject in crisis and decline, the subjectivity of “aura,” a Proustian fixation on the past (an always already passing moment) that could find freedom only in its infinite dilation and deferral, ceding the present to manic-neurotic voiding repetition and its frenzy of destruction? Could the experience of the destruction of aura have a critical value? Could history be experienced?
3. Adorno on “culture industry”

The example of recorded music

One may get the impression from Adorno that he was concerned with how, for instance, recorded music was itself an improper way to listen to music, was improper to the aesthetic, to the form, and that is what was wrong with it. But in his late essay on “Opera and the Long-playing Record,” Adorno addresses the flip side of recording, its emancipatory aspect, which was always an aspect of Adorno’s writings on media. That recording is an impropriety to the listening experience, which the medium brings, is, for Adorno, its actual, critical value. There is a dialectical reversal of the valence of recorded music. In Adorno’s other essays this is the minor note, whereas in the “Opera and the LP Record,” this is the major note. The occasion for Adorno’s rumination is opera as a multifarious genre.

This is not because of the historical intervention of recording technology. Rather, Adorno’s point was that the long-playing (33 rpm) record, invented in the mid-20th century, allows the possibility to hear a Wagner opera, for the “very first time.” In this sense, Wagner was already composing for the LP before it was invented. But this is a matter of the form of the opera.

For Adorno, there is a great difference between “Italian opera,” which is a series arias, and recitatives, providing a narrative setting for music, and the operatic works of Wagner, with his “through composition,” that is, one entire piece of music, in which the leitmotif is its structuring principle, as opposed to melodic phrases situated in a musical
architecture. Wagner’s operas are not series of songs the way “Italian opera” was. The earlier form of opera was a mixed genre, of drama and music, whereas Wagner aimed at the “total work of art,” in which drama and music were inseparable. This also meant that the Wagnerian opera cannot decompose into a series of arias. That it still did so, in a certain sense, was Adorno’s point. This was because of something that Adorno pointed out in his earlier essay on “The Radio Symphony,” that the radio broadcast of the symphony reduced its architectonic structure into a series of melodies, despite the fact that symphonies are not primarily about melodies. Rather, the modern listener makes the symphony melodic in its listening experience, as a way of grasping it.

Listening and form

The modern listener is overwhelmed by the classical symphonic form, and is thus not able to follow it the way Beethoven, for instance, may have assumed in composing as he did. Beethoven assumed that one could grasp the whole through its parts, constantly relating part and whole, through the sonata structure. While colloquial language would refer to the problem of “attention span,” that modern listeners lack the attention span for Beethoven, but it is significant that Adorno does not pose the problem of listening in that way. What Adorno poses, rather, is that modern listeners do not listen to the structure, but rather listen to the “sound.” In this sense, the modern listener pays attention to the music “too much.” The reason the modern listener is overwhelmed by the symphonic form, according to Adorno, is that attention is paid too much to the texture of the music, to the
harmonics and the sonorities, the phenomena that give jazz, for example, its charms: the “dirty notes,” the modulation, the way syncopation functions, as rhythmic interference, etc. Because the modern subject listens this way, the symphony gives “too much.”

For Beethoven, the symphony was a simpler form than what it became for later, especially in Adorno’s account of 20th century listeners. There was no danger of Beethoven overwhelming his contemporary listeners, because he assumed they would not seize onto the sound texture as the aesthetic quality of the work. Rather, they would be able to follow the structure in terms of the themes introduced, then voiced later by other instruments, etc. This involved listening “intellectually.” It’s not that modern listeners are more or less educated musically than in Beethoven’s time, but rather educated differently.

According to Adorno, modern listeners can actually hear nuances of sound that in Beethoven’s time would have been assumed would not be paid attention to very much if at all. Modern listeners in this sense find music a much richer experience in the details than was once the case. It was once powerful, certainly, but more as structure, not as sound. Modern listeners seize on the sound, and because of that, Beethoven gives them much more information than Beethoven intended. But modern listeners are, according to Adorno, actually attuned to this. Adorno calls it the “fetishism of the voice,” that listeners can (supposedly) tell the difference of a Stradivarius violin. Beethoven himself would not have listened the way moderns do, otherwise he would not have composed as he did.

A good example in Adorno’s estimation is Webern’s *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, which is five minutes long. Adorno invites comparison of Webern with a Beethoven
symphony. In Adorno’s account of modern listening, there is as much occurring in five minutes of Webern’s composition as in a much longer symphony. For Beethoven to accomplish musically, laying out the material and guiding the listener through it, structuring the experience, his symphony requires an hour. Webern needs only five minutes. Due to the density of the listening experience, this is all it takes, according to Adorno, to do the musical exposition that Beethoven did in an entire hour-long symphony.

Classical music as historical foil
Beethoven and Mozart both introduced a richness of sound that prior music was lacking. This is paradoxical, as Adorno points out, regarding the 20th century fashion for the Baroque, for Bach. Mozart and Beethoven, Classical tonal music, is indeed rich in color, and introduced a richness of experience, by comparison to what came before them. But what’s significant for Adorno, is that, in the 20th century, Bach sounds richer by comparison to Mozart or Beethoven, whose music seems simpler. There is thus, for Adorno, an exoticism of the pre-modern: there is a reaction against Classical music. The diversity of the particular and the unity of the whole, the moment of high tension, dissolves, according to Adorno, in the classical music of Mozart and Beethoven. Bach strikes the modern listener as less resolved. So, by comparison, Mozart and Beethoven come to sound, according to Adorno, like “music lessons.”
For Adorno, Mozart and Beethoven were classical “bourgeois” subjects, in which part and whole, individual and society, were in adequate relation. So, the question becomes, why didn’t people continue to compose like Mozart and Beethoven indefinitely? This is due, according to Adorno, to subjectivity having become more problematic, more self-contradictory, and thus contorted in a different historical direction. What was held in tension in the Classical era, disintegrates in the apparent diversity of the 20th century, into avant-garde music, jazz, popular music, Schönberg and Stravinsky, non-Western and pre-modern music, John Cage, etc., but as, at base, a common listening experience. It is not that some listeners listen to some music and not other kinds. Rather, all are potential listeners of all these various kinds of music. It is not a matter of a disintegrated musical listening public or various niche markets. Rather, as in the case of Baudelaire and Nietzsche, according to Nietzsche’s dedication for Thus Spoke Zarathustra, modern works of art are “for all and for none.”

There is a radical diversification of art after the late-18th to early-19th century moment of “classical” bourgeois subjectivity. There is a rich explosion of artistic practices that takes place, beginning in the 19th century, and continuing into the 20th century, of which Adorno seeks to take account. The problem, for Adorno, is that this is only “apparent” diversity, and not yet adequate plurality or “multiplicity,” because it is experienced as an internal contradiction in music, as Schönberg versus jazz, rather than as both, despite the fact that modern listeners are indeed listeners of both: there is no actual separation among them according to taste or judgment. Rather, modern listeners
are not able to fully experience the diversity that they themselves, in a sense, have
brought, historically, into being. The diversification cannot be experienced in its true
particularization.

The diversification of experience is thus only potential and not yet actual. All the
various forms feel inadequate to modern subjects. As Adorno put in the “Fetish
Character” essay, “All music invokes inscrutable rites and mystical experiences, and is
provocative nonsense.” All music. Music is inadequate to its listeners, but its listeners are
also inadequate to it. Adorno questions modern subjects’ ability to actually experience
music. This is a problem of what is occurring in and for the listening subjects, and not
“in” the music itself. Beethoven’s aesthetic is a Kantian one, in which it is possible to
recognize that the experience is a matter of what the subjects are bringing to the object
and not the object in-itself. Modern subjectivity is characterized by a melancholic
aesthetic by comparison to that of the “classical” bourgeois era. Modern listeners want
exact performances, and high-fidelity transmissions/recordings. It is the modern subjects
as melancholics who think that this is a matter of the object, rather than of themselves.
For Beethoven there was a joy of construction involved, an experimentation that is not
the radicalized and overwrought experimentation of the 20th century avant-garde. There
was play in music, and not a question of whether music was still possible to compose at
all, as there is with Cage, et al. Beethoven didn’t ask such a question: of course art was
possible. Whereas, by the 20th century, a much more drastic experience of aesthetic
meaning takes hold: it is all or nothing. Here is what Adorno called the “other-directed,”
“projective identification” with objects of experience, an authoritarianism of aesthetic subjectivity. Art “belongs” to its subjects. But to try to make subjects own their experience in a Kantian sense would be no less authoritarian, because it would repress the fact that subjectivity has become problematic, that subjects are not identical with their own experience, not identical with themselves, but not in the Kantian sense of the potential further development of freedom, but rather in the opposite sense of disintegration. The question and problem, for Adorno, is, hence, about experience as such.

**The impossibility and necessity of aesthetic experience**

The recording of music is an expression of the inability to experience music. It expresses the want to return to an experience: as Adorno analogized this, it is like a dog jumping at a closed door handle, a neurotic repetition. If the subject cannot possess the experience, in the sense of having a recording, there is a sense that the experience cannot be had at all. (This recalls Kracauer on photography, and the disparity between, but mutually constitutive character of the opposition of the “memory image” to the photographic image.)

There are two ways of thinking about such “fragmentation” of experience, according to Adorno. It is not merely in the sense of brokenness (though this can provide a rich descriptive realm), but rather incompleteness. It can suggest the whole that is not yet realized, as potential: a transfigured whole. Postmodernists celebrate the destruction
of the whole, whereas the point, with Adorno, is to recognize the totality as problematic, but also in terms of what it ought to be, what it could and should be. Postmodernists say this should not even be attempted, whereas the point is to recognize what it is the subjects of modern art are trying but failing to do.

Poetry “after Auschwitz” is both impossible and necessary, nonetheless, according to Adorno. Poets keep trying. Regression means that the attempt is made in a more obscure, less self-conscious way than has been possible previously. The consciousness of artists has become less focused in postmodernism, by comparison to the period of Benjamin and Adorno, when the relation between art and politics was more clear than today.

Adorno asserted that a different kind of consciousness is necessary, but more in terms of a modicum of increased consciousness, as in Freudian psychotherapy. Artists have become less likely to push the envelope of experience as they have become more marginalized, the place of art more threatened if only through obscurity. But, anticipating this problem in “postmodernism,” for Adorno, there is nonetheless the need to be able to register the depth of the problem. For Adorno, shrinking back from the problem of changing society and the politics of this entails shrinking back from the depth of (the problem of) experience, and thus from modern subjects’ capacity for consciousness, a “fear of freedom” (in Wilhelm Reich’s phrase).

For Adorno, art and politics rise and fall together. As regards provoking consciousness, the pain of “everyday life” has become ever more obscure, repressed. Art
both partakes of this repression and makes it available for critical recognition, perhaps.

For Adorno, in one of his last writings, “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?,” it takes
the form of “free-floating anxiety,” that is, anxiety, but without a proper focus or critical
objectification. For Adorno, art remains art only to the extent that it continues to register
suffering at all. As the last line of Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory states,

But then what would art be, as the writing of history, if it shook off the
memory of accumulated suffering.
CONCLUSION

Adorno’s Marxism

Adorno’s Marxism is premised on a philosophy of history that framed the question of critical thought in the 20th century. Adorno’s theory of historical regression, or what Benjamin called “the regression of society,” reckoned with the lowered political and social horizons in Adorno’s time. This is perhaps the bitterest of all Adorno’s lessons for the present. It is the source of both the attraction and repulsion of Adorno’s work for later readers. It is also the source of a certain mystification of Adorno’s work. But such mystification can be dispelled by attending closely to Adorno’s statements regarding the history of Marxism of which he considered his own work to be part. It is important, then, to be able to regard Adorno’s work in its own terms, “immanently,” as Adorno himself put it. In order to do so, it is first necessary to include all of the political assumptions informing Adorno’s work, how he regarded the trajectory of historical development in his lifetime in political terms.

Regarding Adorno’s adherence to Lenin, such political assumptions were responsible for considerable confusion in the reception of Adorno’s work, specifically in the 1960s era of the New Left and its aftermath. At that time to be politically opposed to the USSR and official Communist Parties meant to be “anti-Leninist.” However, as Horkheimer put it in his 1956 conversation with Adorno, “It must become quite clear from our general position why one can be a communist and yet despise the Russians.” Furthermore, Horkheimer explained the difficulty in that, as he said,
We have nothing in common with Russian bureaucrats. But they stand for a greater right as opposed to Western culture. It is the fault of the West that the Russian Revolution went the way it did. I am always terribly afraid that if we start talking about politics, it will produce the kind of discussion that used to be customary in the Institute.

Adorno maintained in his conversation with Horkheimer that, “Discussion should at all costs avoid a debased form of Marxism. . . . On the other hand, we must not abandon Marxist terminology.” It was in this respect, then, that Adorno asserted the necessity of remaining “strictly Leninist.” It was precisely in ways that the “Russian bureaucrats” could not be so Leninist as Adorno. As T.J. Clark put it (in “Should Benjamin have read Marx?,” 2003), it was always Adorno’s intention to “out-flank” the Stalinized Communist International from the Left. This was the case while attempting to avoid the fate of Trotskyism: “They still talk as if a far-left splinter group were on the point of rejoining the Politburo tomorrow.” This, when “[p]eople are as yet unaware that the Russians are fascists.” The theory of historical regression informed such statements in conversation with Adorno when Horkheimer said, “We cannot rely on the assumption that people will still have any memories of socialism.”

If such statements seem peculiar when imagined in their historical moment of the 1950s, the time of the apparent convergence of socialism and capitalism in “industrial society,” that is, when socialism seemed to have triumphed essentially in certain key respects, then their meaning should be plain enough today, more than a generation later,
after the collapse of the USSR. Adorno’s theory of historical regression would seem, then, to pertain *increasingly* rather than decreasingly in the present, for after the 1960s certainly the memory of socialism has grown fainter still, if it has not been obliterated completely.

This is the difficulty, then, attending Adorno’s work: the apparently obscure memory of socialism that informed Adorno’s Marxism in contrast to virtually all other varieties. The issue, then, would be to discern how Adorno’s work indeed preserved the memory of the assumptions about socialism that originally informed Marxism, both Marx’s own, and those of Marx’s followers Adorno had esteemed, such as Engels, Luxemburg, Trotsky and Lenin. Such assumptions in Adorno’s work would constitute a counter-history of Marxism.

Despite the fact that Adorno’s explicit statements on the history of Marxism are relatively few and scattered and are not without a certain cryptic character, it is nonetheless possible to reconstruct these assumptions by reference to the work by Marxists Adorno cites by name alone (usually without direct quotation of their work), whose familiarity Adorno assumed. This is important and necessary to do, not only because it can clear up interpretive difficulties of Adorno’s own work, but rather because it can allow Adorno’s work to serve as guide to the obscured history Adorno assumed to be nevertheless vital.
In a late essay, “Society,” 1 Adorno begins by pointing out that “society is a concept of the Third Estate” (144). Adorno also points out that the “idea of society” would appear to confirm most of all:

Nietzsche’s insight that “concepts which are basically short-hand for process” elude verbal definition. For society is essentially process; its laws of movement tell more about it than whatever invariables might be deduced. . . . The whole survives only through the unity of the functions which its members fulfill. (144–145)

Furthermore, Adorno asserts that,

The requirement that society must be defined through theory . . . is itself a theory of society. . . . [S]ociety is both known and unknown from the inside. . . . It is a fact that in middle-class society . . . genuine reflection on the nature of society would begin precisely where “comprehension” ceased . . . the sign of relationships between men that have grown increasingly independent of them, opaque, now standing off against human beings like some different substance. It ought to be the task of sociology today to comprehend the incomprehensible, the advance of human beings into the inhuman. (146–147)

Such a critical relation between the activity of bourgeois society and the alienation of capital is what Adorno aimed at capturing in his work, provoking recognition of the not yet comprehended, indeed the “incomprehensible.” This was not, however, an argument

for some progress in knowledge, but rather called for the deepening of critical recognition of what stood as a barrier to knowledge, “that which is alien and threatening, as constraint” (147). Adorno characterized such critical recognition as “speculative theory” (146), descended from “the period around 1848” (152): it was Marxism.

This was because “society remains class struggle” (149), even if what was once “conflict between a group immanent to society, the middle class, and one which was half outside it, the proletariat” (152), stood in apparent “sharp contrast” (152) to the present. However, according to Adorno,

Society needs this tireless intellectual reduplication of everything that is, because without this praise of the monotonously alike and with waning efforts to justify what exists on the grounds of its mere existence, men would ultimately do away with this state of things with impatience. (152)

This “tireless intellectual reduplication of everything that is” amounted to a regression of consciousness. Moreover, the “adaptation of men to social relationships and processes . . . constitutes history.”

The problem, then, would be the regression of history that expressed the “regression of society” in the “fate of modern society” in which “subject and object have attained ultimate reconciliation” (152). This was Adorno’s plea for recognition of the “non-identity” of object and subject. The question was how to provide this, given that it could be objected that “the theory of society entrenches itself behind such subjectivity” (146). For Adorno, this rested on the matter of plausibility, rather than other bases for
verification. For, “a self-validation concept such as that of society . . . must develop as it is being understood” (146). The problem that it was not being so developed, for the basis for understanding once provided by “ideologies” had become replaced by the “culture industry” (152), in which people are “hindered from coming to consciousness of themselves as subjects” (152). However, this changed nothing, as Adorno averred, for “social theory is not supposed to be predicated on subjective awareness” (150). Rather,

Screened from subjectivity, the difference between classes grows objectively with the increasing concentration of capital. This plays a decisive part in the existence of individuals; if it were not so, the notion of class would be mere fetishization. (150)

So, what, then, was the basis for any possible plausibility in Adorno’s (Marxist) theory? According to Adorno, “The lower classes have fewer illusions, are less ‘idealistic’ ” (150): “Empirical sociological investigation has been able to distinguish essential differences in attitude between those assigned in a general statistical way to upper and lower classes” (150). The workers were no longer “half outside” bourgeois society, as they had been still in the era of the Industrial Revolution. But they had been integrated, not as post-bourgeois, but rather as sub-bourgeois, as a function of the historical regression of society. The workers exemplified the “regressed,” sub-bourgeois condition of society as a whole. This, for Adorno, was the only hope. As Adorno had pointed out earlier, in unpublished essays from the 1940s, “Reflections on class theory”
and “Imaginative excesses” (the latter orphaned from *Minima Moralia*), it was precisely the *inhumanity* of the working class’s condition that pointed beyond capital:

> When the constitution of human beings has grown adapted to social antagonisms heightened to the extreme, the humane constitution sufficient to hold antagonism in check will be mediated by the extremes, not an average mingling of the two. The bearers of technical progress, now still mechanized mechanics, will, in evolving their special abilities, reach the point already indicated by technology where specialization grows superfluous. Once their consciousness has been converted into pure means without any qualification, it may cease to be a means and breach, with its attachment to particular objects, the last heteronomous barrier; its last entrapment in the existing state, the last fetishism of the status quo, including that of its own self, which is dissolved in its radical implementation as an instrument. Drawing breath at last, it may grow aware of the incongruence between its rational development and the irrationality of its ends, and act accordingly. (“Imaginative excesses,” “Messages in a bottle,” 13)

Dehumanization is no external power, no propaganda, however conceived, no exclusion from culture. It is precisely the intrinsic reality of the oppressed in the system, who used formerly to stand out because of their
wretchedness, whereas today their wretchedness lies in the fact that they can never escape, that they suspect that the truth is propaganda, while swallowing the propaganda culture that is fetishized and distorted into the madness of an unending reflection of themselves.

This means, however, that dehumanization is also its opposite. In reified human beings reification finds its outer limits. They catch up with the technical forces of production in which the relations of production lie hidden: in this way these relations lose the shock of their alien nature because the alienation is so complete. But they may also soon lose their power. Only when the victims so completely assume the features of the ruling civilization will they be capable of wresting them from the dominant power. (“Reflections on class theory,” *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, 109–110)

If there is a problem in the plausibility of such arguments as these from Adorno, it is not due to what was once taken to be their “pessimism.” Indeed, such musings may appear today to be too optimistic regarding the tenacious longevity of bourgeois social relations, now rendered less apparently inhumane perhaps than during the mid-20th century — apparently.

If the contradiction “mediated by the extremes” is apparently less so today, if the antagonism is slacker and less focused, or otherwise different than in Adorno’s time, then this is explicable in Adorno’s own terms of historical regression. Thus the plausibility of
Adorno’s work becomes reconfigured in a new way, today. Where once the self-contradiction of the social relations of capitalism was occulted by “technology,” in the mid-20th century as opposed to the situation just prior to Adorno, in the high era of Marxism in the late 19th and turn-of-the-20th century, the era of “class struggle” raised perhaps to its highest pitch by the workers’ movement for socialism, today the fetishism of industrial-productive technique is much less compelling than it had been in Adorno’s time, both as symptom and as symbol. If capital could once, in Adorno’s time, appear as “technology” as opposed to “class struggle,” today capital appears again as a social relation among people: the older Marxist contradiction of social value in “wages” vs. “capital” has proven more venerable, if politically perhaps less tenacious, than it was still in Adorno’s time. Today, we have still the contradiction of “wage-labor and capital,” but without the “class struggle” of the workers against the capitalists, without socialist politics.

A non-linear concept of historical regression would find that Adorno’s time of the mid-20th century was transitional between forms of capitalism: not the culmination of capital and its apparent imminent supersession, as it had appeared to “post-industrial” theorists of the 1950s–70s, but rather the passing of the Marxist self-consciousness of the historical significance of the class struggle of the workers against the capitalists with the crisis and failure of Marxism 1914–19, such that the reemphasis of historical pathology directly upon the question of society itself would naturalize capitalism as a social form in a new way. “Class position,” as once understood by Marxists, seems entirely arbitrary.
today: this is what Adorno meant by late capitalism’s “mimicking” or mocking of “the
classless society” (“Reflections on class theory,” 110). But what has passed is not class
“ontology” but rather class politics. The question is, is this for good or for ill?

Adorno’s relating of how the (self-)fetishization of the working class gave way to
the fetishism of technology from the early- to the mid-20th century would need to be
unwound in reading Adorno today: in both forms of reification (of the working class and
of technology), Adorno stressed the fetishization of society and historical development:
the apparent technologization of humanity, or, the anthropomorphization or
personification of technology. Today, this, too, has lost the edge it once had in the mid-
20th century. If for Adorno the necessary forms of appearance of social development
through class struggle gave way to technological development (“the veil of technology”),
today the very notion of historical development itself stands in doubt. This is the meaning
of post-mid-20th century “postmodernism’s” disenchantment of history.

So the philosophy of history Adorno derived from the history of Marxism
demands a reconsideration of the meaning of historical development, the meaning of
“history” at all in the present. Today, it appears not as the unbearable burden of a task of
redemption, as it did to Adorno (following Benjamin), but rather as the discouragement
of the notion of development in history itself. The relevant urgency of history regardless
of linear temporality, regardless of temporal proximity, has become, rather, the equal
(ir)relevance of all moments in history, especially as moments in the struggle for greater
freedom. Not the paradoxical pathology of freedom, the suffering of freedom from itself,
as it was posed from the mid-18th century on (with Rousseau, Kant and Hegel), with the
full emergence of bourgeois society; through the 19th century’s “modernity”
(Baudelaire’s neologism) and Marx; until the mid-20th century with its “post-modern”
disenchantment: but rather the passing of the question of freedom entirely from “history.”

Adorno’s Marxism would demand the recovery of the horizon of freedom in
bourgeois society, despite both its modern pathology and its post-modern
disenchantment. It could be that the passing of history understood as freedom in the 19th
and 20th centuries is opportunity for the rediscovery of freedom as history. But this will
be only as a result of the recovery of the ability and willingness to subject history,
cosmologically, to that “monstrous abbreviation” Benjamin had found in the “dialectics
at a standstill” that characterized it, with Marxism, after 1848, as well as down through to
the mid-20th century, Adorno’s time. For Benjamin, e.g., in his Arcades Project, with
Baudelaire as its central character, this was the 20th century already expressed in the
19th: 1917–19 and its aftermath to 1933 as the replay of 1848–51. Adorno’s insistence on
the meaning of the latter part of this history from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century,
the formative trajectory of the 20th century, 1914–40, was mistaken by those who came
after as the denial of their late, post-WWII 20th century reality, rather than its revelation.
But with Adorno can come the recognition that we might still be there, historically, even
in the moment of forgetting it — precisely in that moment.

Adorno’s point, that the “new is the old in distress,” was the radicalization of
bourgeois society in its crisis of capital, not its obsolescence. This is because the
bourgeois “law of labor” still pertained. There is no line leading out of capital, but rather back into bourgeois society, a deepening of its task of freedom, not yet superseded. Hopefully: Adorno’s Marxism is of our time or it is of no moment at all.
EPILOGUE

Dissertating on Adorno’s Marxism

This dissertation was written with a very deliberate structure that unintentionally but spontaneously and necessarily reproduced both the constellation-like and apodictic character of Adorno’s own writings. Engaging Adorno’s Marxism cannot avoid the qualities of Adorno’s own work if it is to remain at all true to the character of that Marxism, whose disintegration was not the fault of Adorno’s thinking but rather of the history of which it was the product and expression.

This approach not only lacks but actively prevents a systematic (logically linear) argument from manifesting, both within individual chapters and in the dissertation overall. Again, this was unintentional but inevitable, given the strategy pursued by the writing process, which remained motivated by Adorno’s own work. The dissertation selected some central thought-figures from Adorno’s work as key points of entry: most prominently “non-identity” and “regression;” and the crucial relation between these. A major conceit of the dissertation was to accept the truth-content of Adorno’s work as given. The dissertation does not seek to go “beyond Adorno.” For that would be premature, to say the least, if one was to keep in mind Adorno’s own desiderata.

One key intention was to not try to supplement Adorno’s work with a coherence that it itself avoids, for such would be specious, at least from Adorno’s perspective. The dissertation avoids trying to make up in some way for Adorno. This followed Adorno’s own attempt to avoid trying to make up for history in his work. Adorno’s work could not
overcome the failure of the revolution, and Adorno avoided providing apologetics and rationalizations for that failure. Rather, this history of failure tasked Adorno’s work; there was no departing from that task of Marxism. As Rosa Luxemburg’s biographer J.P. Nettl remarked in the preface to his Luxemburg biography, Marxism is unavoidably “repetitively centripetal” (vii). This means something more and other than self-referential. As Adorno himself would have put it, it is in the nature of the object itself.

The dissertation addresses this character of Marxism through Adorno’s Marxist critical theory of the dynamics of modern history, of which Marxism itself is a part, as “recursive” — regressive through repetition. Thus a Marxist approach to the failure of Marxism such as Adorno’s must come around repeatedly to the failure of the revolution, which is not overcome but instantiates itself again and again, in everything. The question is the possible productivity of such regressive quality to modern history. Marxism thus necessarily became a symptom of its own failure, distinguishing itself only through critically recognizing itself as such. This is what Adorno’s work set out to do. Thus Adorno could never have become post-Marxist let alone anti-Marxist. The problem is that the basis for such critical self-reflexivity was lost in subsequent reception. Adorno’s readers did not — perhaps could not possibly — take Marxism for granted the way Adorno himself necessarily did. This left Adorno’s work unpenetrated — impenetrable. Habermas commented on this in his 1969 eulogy of Adorno with which this dissertation commenced.
By contrast, the danger here lies in sharing too much in the taken-for-granted character of Adorno’s Marxism, thus hermetically sealing up the dissertation’s investigation along with Adorno. Hence, the eminent possibility of the approach taken by this dissertation shares inevitably in its manifest unfeasibility, at least for its potential readership. But the barrier is historical, not methodological. The potential folly of this dissertation was pursued with open eyes. Can Adorno’s Marxism be timely in its untimeliness? That is to say, is the approach taken by this dissertation even possible (for readers today)? And what is its potential productivity? What kind of knowledge of Adorno has been thus produced? Alas, this remains largely yet to be seen. Rather, merely the potential basis for such knowledge following Adorno has been laid.

Much has been made of the allegedly “unsystematic” character of Adorno’s work, but this dissertation doesn’t fetishize this, but rather pursues the reason for it, as given by Adorno — that is, the systematic reason for the unsystematic character of modern life, as symptom of attempted but failed emancipation — if through the various ways of the multiple occasions taken for addressing it.

The deficits and liabilities of this strategy are manifest. As a result, thinking through Adorno’s work necessarily stopped short at certain moments, at the limits of the material through which it was approached, and not encompassing the full range of Adorno work. Adorno’s work was approached from different directions, and from various starting points, all quite different in kind. So, for example, addressing Adorno’s work via its critical reception by Gillian Rose was tied sequentially as well as
substantially to consideration of the influence Karl Korsch’s 1923 work exercised on Adorno’s approach to philosophy and Marxism; these do not add up to a whole but they are strongly related. Similarly, among different prominent thematics of Adorno’s work, the role of Benjamin’s philosophy of history is related directly to Adorno’s critical appropriation of Freudian psychoanalysis; and both are grouped with and made part of helping to build towards Adorno’s approach to art.

Finally, not only the chapter structure but also the discursive and rhetorical register of the various chapters and thus the dissertation as a whole take on the essayistic if not the aphoristic character of Adorno’s writings. On the apodictic character of many assertions made at certain points in this dissertation, which are picked up again and elaborated only later in separate chapters, this was due not to adopting Adorno’s paratactical style of dialectics, leaving it up to the reader to recognize contradictions, which the writing of this dissertation avoided as much as possible, but rather the fragmentary and suggestive quality of the various approaches taken by the material and concrete occasions for the different chapters. Where Adorno’s work deliberately attempts to provoke the reader to draw one’s own conclusions at the limits of comprehension, and has the virtues of doing so, this dissertation does so only unfortunately.

The disadvantageous aspects of this strategy are apparent, and its productive qualities are not so readily recognizable. Adorno’s own work, after all, failed to provoke the recognition it sought; it has achieved, rather, what Adorno himself would have regarded only as pseudo-recognition. This dissertation attempts to correct that.
This dissertation never aimed at comprehensiveness, seeking rather to tease out key aspects of Adorno’s work. But it did strive for comprehensibility in its various parts. That it may have failed to achieve this at certain moments must be judged in terms of its overall strategy and method. The dissertation may be unsatisfying as a monograph; it may devolve into a series of essays. Nonetheless, the necessity of relating and attempting to connect various, at first glance divergent, but taken together in common, all neglected aspects of Adorno’s work, made this strategy compelling, at least through the writing process of dissertating on Adorno’s Marxism of which this is the resulting document.

At least, certain points — for instance, Adorno’s Leninism — have been established, if only preliminarily and not in a more desirable thorough-going manner, following their implications. At this end of a six-year excursion, it has become clear that the rationale for this approach, pursuing and relating different aspects of Adorno’s work separately, cannot be adopted in such a form indefinitely but must expire and be transcended in certain if not all respects with the completion of the dissertation itself.

At least Adorno’s Marxism has not been avoided, but it remains to be pursued further still.

END
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