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Immanent Critique as the Core of Critical Theory: Its Origins and Developments in Hegel, Marx and Contemporary Thought

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Immanent critique as the core of critical theory: its origins and developments in Hegel, Marx and contemporary thought*

ABSTRACT

My goal is to explain the intellectual and historical basis of *critical theory* – a term with vague and imprecise meaning for sociologists. Confusion about the approach is more fundamental than that usually attributed to its difficult, philosophical terminology. The central issue is that critical theory is *not* a general theory, but is instead a *method* of analysis deriving from a nonpositivist epistemology. The focus will be upon the method of *immanent critique*, its Hegelian-Marxist roots and its development as the central mode of critical theoretic analysis. Immanent critique is a means of detecting the societal contradictions which offer the most determinate possibilities for emancipatory social change. The commentary on method cannot be separated from its historical application, since the content of immanent critique is the *dialectic in history*.

Jay¹ suggests that critical theory is opposed to closed philosophical systems and that the precise shape of the approach is elusive because it is ‘expressed through a series of critiques of other thinkers and philosophical traditions’. Jay’s book describes the highly diverse works of critical theorists (in social theory, philosophical speculation, aesthetic critique, and historical description) and the broad variety of thinkers they address (e.g., Hegel, Marx, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Weber, Husserl and Heidegger). It is understandable why Susan Buck-Morss concludes that critical theory is ‘a term which lacks substantive precision’.²

Despite its diverse elements, critical theory *does* have a definable core. However, this is often overlooked because it is an historically applied logic of analysis rather than a fixed theoretical or empirical content. Critical theory is based on an interpretation of Marx’s thought.³ It adopts Marx’s analytic categories, continues his critique of capitalism and embraces his goal of emancipation. However,

critical theorists do not retain the whole of Marx's theory, but instead argue that the development of managerial capitalism, state socialism and fascism require its partial revision. Marx believed that the 'laws' of capital were brought out by the 'free market',⁴ so it is consistent to expect that corporate planning, oligopoly, streamlined bureaucracy and state intervention would require some theoretical innovations. Furthermore, Marx was aware of the expanding domination of the nascent bureaucratic state,⁵ but did not live long enough to see its full development (especially in its state socialist form). Marx's appreciation of historical change, sensitivity to developing tendencies of capital and critical approach to all existing social formations projects a view that theory must confront the most serious crises of the day.⁶ For these reasons, critical theorists believe that historically based criticism of Marxism is fully consistent with Marx's own method of analysis.⁷

Critical theorists attack orthodox Marxism-Leninism for embracing the 'Word' of Marx while ignoring his method. In striving for theoretical purity, Marxism-Leninism adopts the ahistorical formalism of nineteenth-century political economy, which Marx detested. Furthermore, it preserves certain problematic themes within Marx's work (e.g. optimistic conceptions of science, 'the party' and revolutionary proletarian consciousness) which deepen, rather than strip away, the mystifications of modern domination. Mechanistic interpretations transform Marxism into 'a pseudo-science of legitimization and domination', promoting rationalization of production at the cost of extreme domination in the political and social spheres.⁸ When it becomes the official ideology of state-bureaucracy, Marxism promotes the expansion, rather than the 'withering away', of the state. As a result, Marx's *raison d'être – emancipation*⁹ – is eclipsed by concerns for political expediency and administrative efficiency.

Western social science, based on the Kantian division of fact and value, is supposed to describe 'what is' without making value judgments. Only science provides *valid* knowledge and its epistemology offers no grounds for valuative truth. Values can only be objects of empirical inquiries, not the basis of scientific critique and praxis. Social scientists may strongly disagree about method, but almost always equate valid knowledge with correct, value-neutral description. Critical theorists attack western empiricism because it reifies conventional values legitimating capitalist society. Likewise, they reject Marxism-Leninism for ordaining dominant values as scientific laws and socialist state bureaucracy as the rational society.¹⁰ Critical theorists oppose the inherent relativism of bourgeois social science, as well as the absolutism of Marxism-Leninism, because neither addresses the most urgent issues of the day (characterized by the rise of fascism, Stalinism, managerial capitalism, oligopoly and universal state-bureaucracy).

Critical theorists also reject metaphysics because the latter legitimated precapitalist structures of domination, and could be revived again for similar purposes (e.g., Nazi Germany exploited metaphysically based folk culture). Critical theorists desire to establish, from the ruins of Enlightenment reason, a basis for valid knowledge that is not fully empirical, purely ideological or metaphysical. It must provide a basis for considering questions of value, but still maintain the requirement for empirical and theoretical rigour in instrumental matters.

My goal is to explain the intellectual and historical basis of *critical theory* – a term with vague and imprecise meaning for sociologists. Confusion about the approach is more fundamental than that usually attributed to its difficult, philosophical terminology. The central issue is that critical theory is *not* a general theory, but is instead a *method* of analysis deriving from a nonpositivist epistemology. This paper will focus upon the method of *immanent critique*, explaining its Hegelian-Marxist roots and development as the central mode of critical-theoretic analysis.¹¹ Immanent critique is a means of detecting the societal contradictions which offer the most determinate possibilities for emancipatory social change. The commentary on method cannot be separated from its historical application, since the content of immanent critique is the *dialectic in history*.

THE HEGELIAN AND MARXIAN ROOTS OF IMMANENT CRITIQUE

Hegel's 'radical immanentist' philosophy holds that reason serves only 'Spirit'.¹² He rejects both metaphysics and empiricism for assuming realities beyond the subject – e.g., Platonic forms, things-in-themselves, sense data. Hegel argued that constituted objects as well as the forces of contradiction, negation and change are contained *within* Spirit.¹³ Driven by 'Desire', the Hegelian subject engages in self-formative and self-transformative labour, causing 'the development of Spirit in *Time* . . . [and] *Space*'.¹⁴

Hegel argues that the subject loses control of its self-creation by positing its own products as external to itself ('self-estrangement'). However, through labour, the subject discovers its capacity for rationally transforming the reified object world. Estrangement abates gradually as the increasingly 'self-conscious' subject shapes its world progressively into more highly rational syntheses. Historically specific labour, through a process of 'determinate negation', moves Spirit toward a 'terminus' of complete freedom and rationality.¹⁵ Hegel provides a critical analysis of reification (as objectification) aimed at demystifying the *human* construction of history. It is an *immanent critique* because its critical standards are ones given in the historical process.¹⁶

Marx departs from a reconstructed Hegelian foundation. He was attracted to Hegel's philosophy because it lacked the antagonistic division of 'is' and 'ought' usually found in German idealism.¹⁷ Marx wrote, 'Setting out from idealism . . . I hit upon seeking the Idea in the real itself. If formerly the gods had dwelt above the world, they had now become its center.'¹⁸ Marx concluded that immanent principles were necessary weapons in the struggle for progressive social change,¹⁹ because they provide a basis for critique *within* historical reality. Later, this immanent grounding became the axis of his emancipatory critique of capitalism.

Marx retains the Hegelian view of humanity: it creates itself through labour, loses itself in estranged labour and overcomes alienation through reappropriation of the labour process. However, despite their mutual appreciation of labour, Marx alters Hegel's immanent critique radically. Marx states that

Hegel's view of history presupposes an *abstract* or *Absolute Spirit* which develops in such a way that mankind is only a *Mass*, a conscious or unconscious vehicle for Spirit. Hence Hegel provides for the development of a *speculative*, esoteric history within *empirical* exoteric history. The history of mankind becomes the history of the *abstract spirit* of mankind, thus a spirit *beyond* actual man.²⁰

Marx attacks Hegel for emphasizing '*abstract mental labor*'. He substitutes 'naturalism' for Hegelian idealism, replacing 'Spirit' with 'real, corporeal *man*'.²¹ This 'actual, sensuous, real, finite, particular' human occupies a world of '*real natural objects*' mediated by human '*essential powers*'.²² For Marx, both 'natural object' and 'essential powers' are objective and real; history reflects the interaction of humanity's objective, essential powers with real objects.²³ Labour transforms natural objects into human objects, creating a human history open to rational understanding.

Marx rejects Hegel's equation of objectification with estrangement — that 'reappropriation of the estranged objective essence' is simply 'a process of incorporation into self-consciousness'.²⁴ Marx argues that estrangement does not derive from objectification, but originates in the economically mediated process of social domination. He asserts that alienation can be overcome only by labour and struggle, not by a simple alteration of consciousness.²⁵

Marx asserts that Hegelian philosophy makes the 'subject' a '*self-knowing and self-manifesting Idea*', while 'real men and real nature become mere predicates'.²⁶ He believes that Hegel, despite his claims to immanence, creates a metaphysical subject divorced from real historical individuals.²⁷ Marx implies that Hegel's idealist idiom generates an uncritical perspective toward the empirical world where 'real men' live their lives. In particular, it fosters the characteristic error of bourgeois social thought: confusing legitimations with the

real attributes of concrete social institutions. This error is manifested grossly in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* where he attributes a higher substantive rationality to the Prussian state and its institutions of monarchy, bureaucracy, limited suffrage and private property.²⁸ Marx attacks the work because its subject matter is portrayed 'as it thinks itself' rather than 'as it is'.²⁹ Marx abandons the concept of 'Spirit' in order to avoid the Hegelian conflation of ideology and social structure. The emphasis on the *contradiction*, rather than correspondence, between concrete social formations and their ideologies is the basis of Marx's immanent critique.

Like Hegel, Marx argues that immanent contradictions lead ultimately to an emancipatory terminus. However, Marx attempted to ground his standard of emancipation in concrete history, rather than in presuppositions about 'Spirit'. The emancipatory telos, according to Marx, derives from the struggle against natural necessity. Humanity, in labouring to satisfy its animal needs³⁰ confronts social and political constraints (unreconciled nature)³¹ as well as material ones. Social structures, created expressly for the provision of animal needs, replace the direct struggle for survival with socially mediated necessity pitting 'man against man'. Emancipation originates as a battle against domination in the natural sphere, but is later extended to society in reaction to human exploitation. Marx holds that human needs become more elaborate as the means of production advance and natural necessity recedes. Emancipation, itself, becomes a need because other 'higher' needs require a social order promoting rationality and freedom.

Marx substitutes a history of class domination and class struggle for Hegel's historical phenomenology. For Marx, the movement toward freedom and reason is not an unfolding of labour in consciousness, but is instead, an historical transformation³² born of social struggle and ultimately realized through the efforts of an historical agent of emancipation – the proletariat. This is the basis for an immanent critique that turns the treasured values of bourgeois ideology against the unfreedom, inequality and misery of developing capitalism.³³

CRITICAL THEORY AND INSTRUMENTAL REASON

Horkheimer and Adorno say that 'with the extension of the bourgeois commodity economy, the dark horizon of myth is illumined by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose cold rays the seed of a new barbarism grows to fruition'.³⁴ They state further:

In their [the masses] eyes, their reduction to mere objects of the administered life, which preforms every sector of modern existence including language and perception, represents objective necessity,

against which they believe there is nothing they can do. Misery as the antithesis of power and powerlessness grows immeasurably, together with the capacity to remove all misery permanently. Each individual is unable to penetrate the forest of cliques and institutions which, from the highest levels of command to the last professional rackets, ensure the boundless persistence of status.³⁵

Critical theorists believe that the conditions of capitalist domination have been altered, but not so radically as to force abandonment of the critique of commodity production. Modern domination involves new forms of control, yet still contains the general contradictions emphasized by Marx. The 'new barbarism' is characterized by 'comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom', rather than the crude, direct exploitation of early industrial capitalism.³⁶ 'Domination is transfigured into administration' and 'the tangible source of exploitation disappears behind the facade of objective rationality'.³⁷

The worker's consumption, freedom and general quality of life declined sharply during the transition from household to factory production.³⁸ Exploitation was transparent and workers sometimes resisted it.³⁹ The conditions of production were so cruel that they could not be legitimated internally. Thus, absolute reason (religion) remained an important ideology. Workers could not conclude from their condition that the ideal was real, but religions, such as Methodism, could promise rewards in an after-life.⁴⁰ Marx unmasked absolute reason as a means of legitimating the ugly realities of early industrial society. This, of course, was later combined with his broader critique of the secular dogma (political economy) of the bourgeois class.

Marcuse states that,

The technical achievement of advanced industrial society, and the effective manipulation of mental and material productivity have brought about a *shift in the locus of mystification*. If it is meaningful to say that the ideology comes to be embodied in the process of production itself, it may also be meaningful to suggest that, in this society, the rational rather than the irrational becomes the most effective vehicle of mystification.⁴¹

Marcuse implies that otherworldly and secular idealism are now unnecessary. In his 'one dimensionality' thesis, he explains that a system that 'delivers the goods' legitimates itself in the process of commodity production and distribution.⁴² Advanced industrialism preserves work's alienating qualities, but does not demand the quantity and intensity of labour characteristic of early industrial capitalism.⁴³ The reduced demands imply that the system is responsive to the worker's plight. Despite some continued privations, workers can remember lower wages, longer workdays, fewer benefits, and greater insecurity.⁴⁴ The wage labour system and worker

powerlessness remain, but are now counterbalanced by conditions which increase the ‘‘social and cultural integration’’ of the laboring class with capitalist society.⁴⁵

The improving material fate of workers is a *prima facie* legitimization that promotes more efficient capitalist domination. The expansion of worker consumption must be considered in the context of corporate responses to the intensifying contradictions of industrial capitalism.⁴⁶ Corporate regulated commodity consumption defused increasing worker discontent, while at the same time it provided a new arena for capitalist valorization. Finally, the production of new needs and administered means of ‘satisfying’ them extended corporate manipulation beyond the workplace deep into social life.

Ewen states that

The triumph of capitalism in the twentieth century has been its ability to define and contend with the conditions of the social realm. From the period of the 1920’s, commercial culture has increasingly provided an idiom within which desires for social change and fantasies of liberation might be articulated and contained. The cultural displacement effected by consumerism has provided a mode of perception that has both confronted the question of human need and at the same time restricted its possibilities.⁴⁷

Consumer society alters the conditions of ‘class conflict’.⁴⁸ Despite continued exploitation, alienation and increased administration, workers now share, with those who control their labour, an interest in perpetuating the system. The material and symbolic significance of commodities results in workers feeling that they have more to lose than their chains. Except for the lumpenproletariat, most workers’ immediate interests require maintenance of the corporate structure. Periodic dysfunctions (e.g., the ‘oil crisis’, inflation, layoffs) can cause considerable suffering, but generate ameliorative, instead of revolutionary, reactions. Most labour/management disputes now affirm rather than challenge corporate structure. Labour demands more security, commodities and leisure time, but with each gain it becomes more dependent upon capitalism. Despite occasional conflicts, the radical polarization of bourgeoisie and proletariat is being contained. Class conflict is, more than ever, a latent conflict of interests, rather than a ‘class war’.

The contradictions of capitalism remain in mutated form, manifesting themselves not merely in the exploitation of labour, but in the ruthless power of capital over the organization of social, cultural and material life. The élite-concentrated ownership of American wealth has been stable (despite increases in worker consumption),⁴⁹ while the means of administering it have been extended and rationalized. The manipulation of needs through advertising, the development

of 'cybernetic' controls for state and corporate bureaucracies and organizational streamlining all contribute to increased administrative power. The 'separation' of ownership and management further rationalizes the pursuit of exchange value by placing the operations of the modern firm in the hands of specialists who must manage it in the interests of long-term profitability. This promotes profit and stability, while it frees capital owners for full-time management of their diverse capital investments. Finally, the technocratic division of labour covers the real interests and activities of higher management with a veneer of scientism. Control becomes distant, impersonal and indirect – it emanates from reified routines that take on a transcendental quality.

The contradictions of capitalism shift from the rude material privation of workers, to a dialectic involving depoliticization, over-administration, waste, environmental destruction and other consequences of the rationalization of the arbitrary power of capital. However, the broader contradiction remains between revolutionized means of production and social relations of production that are not yet fully socialized. Irrationality and necessity are perpetuated, despite the existence of means for overcoming them.

Critical theorists do not have faith in an *inevitable* emancipation arising from either an armed confrontation between the proletariat and bourgeoisie or from a scientific 'revolution'. Instead, they are deeply concerned with the pacification of the working class and with the functioning of science and technology as instruments of domination.⁵⁰ Critical theorists imply that Marx's faith in the proletariat and in science/technology introduce a quasi-metaphysical determinism into his analysis. This is reflected in his proletarianized, materialist version of the Hegelian unfolding of history to an eventual terminus in rationality and freedom. Marx's optimism was understandable in his day, though questionable. Today his position is not only implausible, but it also erodes Marxism's critical edge and opens it to ideological abuse. The *guaranteed* terminus justifies repressive means in the short term when people live their lives. The promise of emancipation, 'insured' by the advance of science and technology under the guidance of the 'workers' state', legitimates cultural, political and social repression.

Marx understood bureaucracy, but was insensitive to the possible despotic consequences of the bureaucratic centralization of state power during the 'transition' to communism.⁵¹ Modern state socialism has transformed the 'temporary' dictatorship of the proletariat into an awesome and enduring instrument of bureaucratic domination. For this reason, critical theorists criticize state socialism with as much vigour as they attack consumer capitalism. The expropriation of surplus value, worker alienation and powerlessness, as well as political and cultural repression, exist in these 'socialist' societies.

The state-owned means of production managed by a planning élite, is contradictory to the Marxist ideology of democratically determined community needs. Critical theorists perform on Marxism what Marx did to Hegel. They criticize its ahistorical aspects from the perspective of the concrete conditions under which people *now* live. Thus, the immanent critique has two critical moments: one moving from ideology to social reality and the other in the obverse direction. The goal of the method is immanent truth which unifies what is, with the *determinate* possibilities for, what could be.

Schroyer describes immanent critique as a means of restoring 'actuality to false appearance' by first describing 'what a social totality holds itself to be, and then confronting it with what it is in fact becoming'.⁵² Immanent critique attacks social reality from its own standpoint, but at the same time criticizes the standpoint from the perspective of its historical context. Horkheimer states

Again and again *in history*, ideas have cast off their swaddling clothes and struck out against the social systems that bore them. The cause, in large degree, is that spirit, language, and all the realms of the mind necessarily stake universal claims. Even ruling groups, intent above all upon defending their particular interests, must stress universal motifs in religion, morality and science. Thus originates the contradiction between the existent and ideology, a contradiction that spurs all historical progress. While conformism presupposes the basic harmony of the two and includes the minor discrepancies in the ideology itself, philosophy makes men conscious of the contradiction between them. On the one hand it appraises society by the light of the very ideas that it recognizes as its highest values; on the other, it is aware that these ideas reflect the taints of reality.⁵³

Horkheimer argues that immanent critique describes the dialectic in history which is driven by the contradictions between ideology and reality. Élites attempt to stall change by denying these contradictions; they portray a false unity of the ideal and real. However, the greater the ideological claims, the more dangerous they become to their social context. Immanent critique seeks, by revealing the contradictions of claim and context, to transform legitimations into emancipatory weapons. The goal is to replace the inaction based on the false correspondence with emancipatory praxis aimed at making the ideal real.

Critical theory alters the content, but not the form of Marx's immanent critique. Marx's rejection of religion and political economy are retained, but the critique is extended to modern epistemology (which equates truth with 'calculations that work').⁵⁴ This approach defines experimentally controlled observation as the ideal means for determining valid knowledge. As a result 'all things in nature become

identical with the phenomena they present when submitted to the practices of our laboratories, whose problems no less than their apparatus express in turn the problems and interests of society as it is'.⁵⁵ This radically instrumentalized form of reason eliminates questions of value from its inquiries – and from rational knowledge. In the process, it destroys negativity, hypostatizes the real and in the end, becomes itself a metaphysic of the concrete.⁵⁶

Horkheimer states,

According to the philosophy of the average modern intellectual, there is only one authority, namely, science, conceived as the classification of facts and the calculation of probabilities. The statement that justice and freedom are better in themselves than injustice and oppression is scientifically unverifiable and useless. It has come to sound as meaningless in itself as would the statement that red is more beautiful than blue, or that an egg is better than milk.⁵⁷

Horkheimer believes that societal values (e.g., justice, equality, happiness, tolerance) have lost their 'intellectual roots' and although they still exist as vague aims 'there is no rational agency authorized to appraise and link them to an objective reality'.⁵⁸ Science grasps technical routines, while leaving questions of good or right to personal belief. Criticism of ends is relegated to the evaluative sphere, which – partly as a result of earlier critiques of absolutism – has been discredited, relativized and made a matter of individual taste. Instrumental reason promotes bureaucratically administered life, because its value neutrality allows it to work for whomever controls it. In consumer capitalism instrumental rationality conforms to the interests of commodity production and its corporate agents, while it serves the party, state and planning élites under state socialism.

The means orientation of both Marxist-Leninist and bourgeois science contradicts the universal, humanist claims that provide their ultimate grounding. The most important issue involves the fact that instrumental reason cannot be used to evaluate ends, nor to judge the substantive rationality of instrumental routines. Marxist-Leninists and western scientists both claim to be striving ultimately for the creation of a rational society of abundance and freedom. However, their epistemologies do not provide a way of measuring their respective societies' progress against these ultimate ends. In fact, because of their foundation in instrumental reason, both approaches are easily harnessed to the prevailing system of domination for purposes that contradict these values.

The criticism of instrumental rationality, supplements the critique of absolute reason, and provides critical theory with a broader understanding of the links of knowledge to domination. Marx did not analyse instrumental reason critically, and so remained within the

incomplete dialectic of Enlightenment. Enlightenment reason has an extreme ‘anti-authoritarian principle’ — a reaction to the absolute ideologies of the preindustrial age. This principle given free reign, as instrumental reason, turns into irrationality. It brings about ‘the abrogation of everything inherently binding’ allowing ‘domination to ordain as sovereign and to manipulate whatever bonds and obligations prove appropriate to it’.⁵⁹ Fully instrumentalized reason contributes strongly to the domination of nature, but at the cost of vastly extending *rational* domination in the social sphere.

Instrumental reason has two opposing elements:

the abstract ego emptied of all substance except its attempt to transform everything in heaven and on earth into means for its preservation, and on the other hand an empty nature degraded to mere material, mere stuff to be dominated, without any other purpose than that of this very domination.⁶⁰

The Enlightenment abolished absolute reason, but did not provide a rational basis for directing the technical development it helped generate. This made way for unbridled domination in both the natural and human realms. Marx’s optimism about proletarian revolution, science and state centralization derives in part from his view of instrumental rationality as an exclusively emancipatory force. He considered domination to have its origins in necessity and did not recognize a new logic of domination within the ‘scientific’ means of overcoming necessity.

Critical theory emphasizes the contradiction between the ideology of the ‘rational society’ and the actual instrumentally rational domination of bureaucratic administration. It transforms Marx’s critiques of religion and political economy into a broader critique of domination. The Enlightenment ideal of emancipation becomes the standard for criticism in every sector of life under consumer capitalism and state socialism. Critical theorists do not adopt ahistorical assumptions about either a ‘terminus’ or an agent that guarantees emancipation. Such assumptions become justifications for domination and must be rejected. As an immanent critique of domination, the truth of critical theory lies in neither absolute nor instrumental reason, but in the determinate negation of domination. This approach does not lead to a rejection of proletarianism or socialism, but instead emphasizes that both issues must be freshly and rigorously rethought in the context of their democratic ideologies.

CRITICAL THEORY AND EMANCIPATION

Marxist-Leninists condemn critical theory as a modern form of Hegelian idealism.⁶¹ Critical theorists respond that when the

claims of Marxism-Leninism are contrasted with the realities of its role in creating and perpetuating state socialist bureaucracy, it can be rightfully accused, despite its dialectical-materialist slogans, of Hegelianism. The substitution of abstract promises for emancipatory *means* of organization transform the approach into a *metaphysic of the concrete*. Marxism-Leninism's advocacy of the primacy of theory, over fact, is easily translated into the contention that the ideal is real. This shares the one-dimensionality of western empiricism which, starting from an opposing premise, implies that the real is ideal. Critical theorists reject the approaches because both attempt to liquidate the creative tensions between ideology and reality. When the latter two are fused in one dimension, the means for crystallizing class consciousness are eroded.

Critical theory has emphasized primarily the negative moment of the dialectic. It has attacked domination, rather than describing explicit, determinate possibilities for new social formations. However, it is still clear that democracy, in as direct a form as possible, is the flip-side of the critique of state bureaucracy. Critical theorists imply that the 'democracy of the councils' (*self-managed socialism*) is the revolutionary alternative to both corporate capitalism and state socialism.⁶² This would involve a debureaucratized public sphere where all citizens could participate in free communication and practical action to determine the 'consensual norms' governing social and economic life.⁶³ Emancipation is not reduced to a formal possibility, but is viewed both as a matter of immediate struggle and a long-term goal.

The emphasis on democratic organization is not an idealist fantasy, but arises from the fact that élite-controlled bureaucratic social formations, whatever their ideology, reproduce themselves and expand their hegemony rather than 'withering away'. Emancipatory action must establish an alternative to capitalist bureaucracy without restoring domination in the shape of revolutionary authoritarianism or socialist planning élites. Critical theory needs to focus increasingly upon the concrete, practical problems of creating democratic institutions and practices. Its traditional concern with metatheory and cultural critique provides an intellectual alternative to both empiricism and orthodox Marxism-Leninism. However, it is now time to translate this philosophic foundation into determinate critiques of social and economic arrangements, that have more direct bearing upon emancipatory praxis.

Critical theory, to retain vitality, must transcend theoretical archaeology (constant rehashes of Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer), repetitious attacks on positivism and endless debates about highly abstract theories (e.g., of Habermas).⁶⁴ The critique of domination must be translated into historically concrete and regionally specific immanent critiques of bureaucratic domination. These detailed

analyses should investigate the possibilities for democratization according to the particular needs and concrete conditions of nations and regions at different levels of development and with varying histories, social traditions and material cultures. Thus, despite the general emphasis upon socialist democracy, critical theory should *not* insist that a single model of post-bureaucratic society be imposed in all settings. In some contexts these models require extreme force. When this occurs, they seldom achieve their ultimate ends and often become the justification for hegemony by the élite allegedly attempting to impose the model.

Perhaps Marx's original contention holds true, that socialism is possible in only the most advanced industrial nations. Orthodox Marxism-Leninism has little to contribute in such a setting. Its authoritarian means of organization are best suited for concentrating power in the hands of a planning élite for purposes of rapid economic development. The creation of socialism should be considered a separate, and even contradictory, task that is as much political as economic. Once advanced industrialism is a reality, the battle against exploitation must be waged as part of a larger war against élite control. The desire for a democratic public sphere and mass participation in the planning and management of social life, replaces ideas of revolutionary vanguard, state centralization and planning élites. However, before this can occur, the social and political theory guiding emancipatory activity must be freed from its tie to bureaucratic centralism. This goal does not require creation of entirely new ideas, but instead a commitment to the realization of the incomplete project contained in democratic ideology. Emancipatory immanent critique should both portray the contradiction between state bureaucratic society and its democratic ideals (about rationality and freedom) and point to the determinate possibilities for overcoming the contradiction. The critique is not an idealist reduction because it aims to become a basis, not a substitute, for praxis.

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NOTES

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1. Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, Boston, Little, Brown,

1973, p. 41.

2. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, New York, Free Press, 1977, p. 65.

3. See *ibid.*, pp. 1-62; Jay, op. cit., pp. 41-85; Trent Schroyer, *The Critique of Domination*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1973, pp. 44-100.

4. Karl Marx, *Capital*, volume 1, New York, International Publishers, 1967, p. 270.

5. Karl Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, New York, Anchor Books, 1967, pp. 151-202.

6. See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, New York, Vintage Books, 1973, pp. 85-111.

7. Norberto Bobbio, 'Marxism and Socialism', *Telos*, no. 39, 1979, pp. 191-200.

8. See Kansas *Telos* Group, 'The Antioch *Telos* Conference', *Telos*, 32, 1977, pp. 188-92; see also Andrew Arato, 'Understanding Bureaucratic Centralism', *Telos*, 35, 1978, pp. 73-87; Castoriadis, 'The Social Regime in Russia', *Telos*, 38, 1978/1979, pp. 32-47; Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*, London, Pelican, 1971.

9. Marx considered communism 'the actual phase of human emancipation and rehabilitation'. Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, New York, International Publishers, 1964, p. 146.

10. Soviet 'Marxists' eliminate practically all of Marx's thought pertinent to criticism of Soviet society. Their version of 'scientific socialism' aims at perfecting state administrative structure through 'scientific' management (see Gvishiani, *Organization and Management*, Moscow, Progress, 1972, pp. 77-173; V. G. Afanasyev, *The Scientific Management of Society*, Moscow, Progress, 1971, pp. 77-113, 186-253). Soviet administration is impervious to criticism because it reflects 'objective laws' of Marxism-Leninism. Soviet sociologists claim that critical theorists confuse administration, the 'necessary' state machinery of socialism, with capitalist bureaucracy. (See Eduard Batalov, *The*

Philosophy of Revolt, Moscow, Progress, 1975, pp. 226-30.) Furthermore, they argue that any 'attempt to "liberalize" or "democratize" Marxism will . . . play into the hands of those anti-communists who are openly endeavoring . . . to discredit Marxism and undermine its influence on the masses' (Vol. I. Dobrenkov, *Neo-Freudians in Search of 'Truth'*, Moscow, Progress, 1976, p. 162).

11. Immanent critique is an important theme in critical theory, but its role should not be exaggerated. (See Schroyer, op. cit., pp. 29-36; Jay, op. cit., p. 63, Buck-Morss, op. cit., pp. 49-57, 63-9, 113-21.) Major critical theorists, such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, do not restrict themselves to a single method. Like other broad intellectuals, they engage in numerous modes of analysis. However, immanent critique provides unity to their work and distinguishes it from other approaches. Finally, this is the method, partially developed by the first generation of critical theorists, that contains the potential for an even richer critical theory of the future.

12. George Lichtheim, 'Introduction to the Torchbook Edition', Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1967, p. xxiii.

13. See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, New York, Basic Books, 1969, p. 232; Hegel op. cit., pp. 131-45.

14. Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, New York, Dover Publications, 1956, p. 72.

15. Hegel, *The Phenomenology . . .*, pp. 116-21, 137, 507-610, 789-808.

16. Hegel argues that all forces promoting and retarding human development derive from human labour. Therefore, immanent critique must portray the retarding aspects of historical labour in its fully humanized, phenomenological form. For an explicit example of how his critique uses immanent standards, I recommend Hegel's chapter on 'Lordship and Bondage' (*ibid.*, pp. 228-40). This material is one of the crucial

departure points for the development of Marxism out of Hegelianism (see Kojeve, op. cit., pp. 31–70; Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1977, pp. 148–70, 537–71.)

17. Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968, pp. 8–9.

18. Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx* . . . , p. 46.

19. See ibid., pp. 62–3. Marx states that 'Philosophy is the head of this emancipation and the proletariat is its heart'. Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1964, p. 59.

20. Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx* . . . , p. 382.

21. Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* . . . , pp. 180–1.

22. Ibid., pp. 172, 180–1.

23. Ibid., p. 180.

24. Ibid., pp. 175, 179.

25. Ibid., pp. 106–19.

26. Ibid., p. 188.

27. Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx* . . . , pp. 374–84.

28. Georg W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1967, pp. 160–223.

29. Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx* . . . , pp. 152–202. Marx argues that Hegel's analysis of the Prussian state bureaucracy 'could be taken verbatim from the Prussian Civil Code'. Ibid., pp. 180–2.

30. Marx states that 'the first premise of all human existence . . . [is] that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history". But life involves before everything else, eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus production of means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself.' Marx continues, arguing that 'the second point is that the satisfaction of the first need . . . leads to new needs; and this production of new needs is the first historical act.' Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, Moscow, Progress, 1964, p. 39.

31. The term 'unreconciled nature'

refers to social relations of production in which natural necessity is refracted through partially rational means of overcoming necessity. Such systems may provide technically advanced goods and services, but at the same time preserve domination and struggle by perpetuating the unequal distribution of labour responsibilities and benefits.

32. I do not claim that Marx succeeded in developing an argument totally devoid of transhistorical elements, e.g., his claims about a communist 'terminus' to history are not historical.

33. Even Marx's mature works contained immanent criticism, e.g., his analysis of commodities, the labour theory of value and his discussion of unequal exchange. However, Marx's work was not exclusively an immanent critique. His rich legacy includes historical, structural, scientific and polemical aspects. Immanent critique provided a foundation and direction to his emancipatory project, but was not his only tool.

34. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York, Seabury Press, 1972, p. 32.

35. Ibid., p. 38.

36. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1966, p. 1.

37. Ibid., p. 32.

38. See Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 394–504.

39. For example, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York, Vintage Books, 1966, pp. 711–832; Malcolm I. Thomis, *The Luddites*, New York, Schocken, 1970; E. G. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, New York, Mentor, 1962, pp. 44–73, 238–57.

40. Thompson, op. cit., pp. 350–400.

41. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* . . . , p. 189.

42. Ibid., pp. 1–18.

43. Ibid., pp. 26–7.

44. This commentary refers to conditions in the United States.

45. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* . . . , p. 29.
46. Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1976.
47. Ibid., pp. 219-20.
48. See Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, Boston, Beacon Press 1971, pp. 107-22; Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT, 1978, pp. 232-71.
49. See Douglas Dowd, *The Twisted Dream*, Cambridge, Mass., Winthrop Publishers, 1977, pp. 127-64; Gabriel Kolko, *Wealth and Power in America*, New York, Praeger, 1962.
50. For example, see Habermas, op. cit., pp. 81-122; William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1974.
51. See Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx* . . . , pp. 177-90.
52. Shroyer, op. cit., pp. 30-1.
53. Marx Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, New York, Seabury Press, 1974, p. 178. The emphasis is mine.
54. Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, New York, Seabury Press, p. 47.
55. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 49.
56. Ibid., pp. 70-91.
57. Ibid., p. 24.
58. Ibid., p. 23.
59. Horkheimer and Adorno, op. cit., p. 93.
60. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, p. 97.
61. For example, Batalov, op. cit.;
- Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, NLB, 1976; John Horton and Fari Filsoufi, 'Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder in Theory and Method', *Insurgent Sociologist*, 7, 1977, pp. 5-17; Goran Therborn, 'The Frankfurt School', *New Left Review*, 63, 1970, pp. 65-96.
62. Max Horkheimer, 'The Authoritarian State', *Telos*, 15, 1973, p. 6.
63. See the following writings of Jürgen Habermas: 'On Systematically Distorted Communication', *Inquiry*, 13, 1970, pp. 205-18; 'Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence', *Inquiry*, 13, 1970, pp. 360-75; *Toward a Rational Society*; and 'The Public Sphere', *New German Critique*, 3, 1974, pp. 49-55; see also McCarthy, op. cit., pp. 1-16, 272-357.
64. This project has already begun among the current generation of critical theorists. See Arato, op. cit.; Jose Baptista, 'Bureaucracy and Society', *Telos*, 22, 1974/1975, pp. 66-84; Norberto Bobbio, 'Why Democracy', *Telos*, 36, 1978, pp. 43-54; Antonio Carlo, 'The Socio-Economic Nature of the USSR', *Telos*, 21, 1974, pp. 2-86; and 'Capitalism and Crisis in Yugoslavia', 36, 1978, pp. 81-110; Cornelius Castoriadis, 'The Hungarian Source', *Telos*, 29, 1976, pp. 4-22; Ferenc Feher, 'The Dictatorship Over Needs', *Telos*, 35, 1978, pp. 31-42; Claude Lefort, 'What is Bureaucracy?', *Telos*, 22, 1974/1975, pp. 31-65; Karel Kovanda, 'Czechoslovak Workers' Councils (1968/1969)', *Telos*, 28, 1976, pp. 36-54.