After Hegel
An interview with Robert B. Pippin

Omair Hussain

On March 14, 2011, Omair Hussain publicly interviewed Hegel scholar Robert B. Pippin on behalf of Platypus, at an event titled On the Possibility of What Isn't, *at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Robert Pippin is a professor on the Committee on Social Thought and in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Chicago, and the author of numerous works on Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche. What follows is an edited transcript of the interview. The full audio of the event is available at <http://www.archive.org/details/PlatypusonThePossibilityOfWhatIsntAnInterview-WithRobertPippin>.*

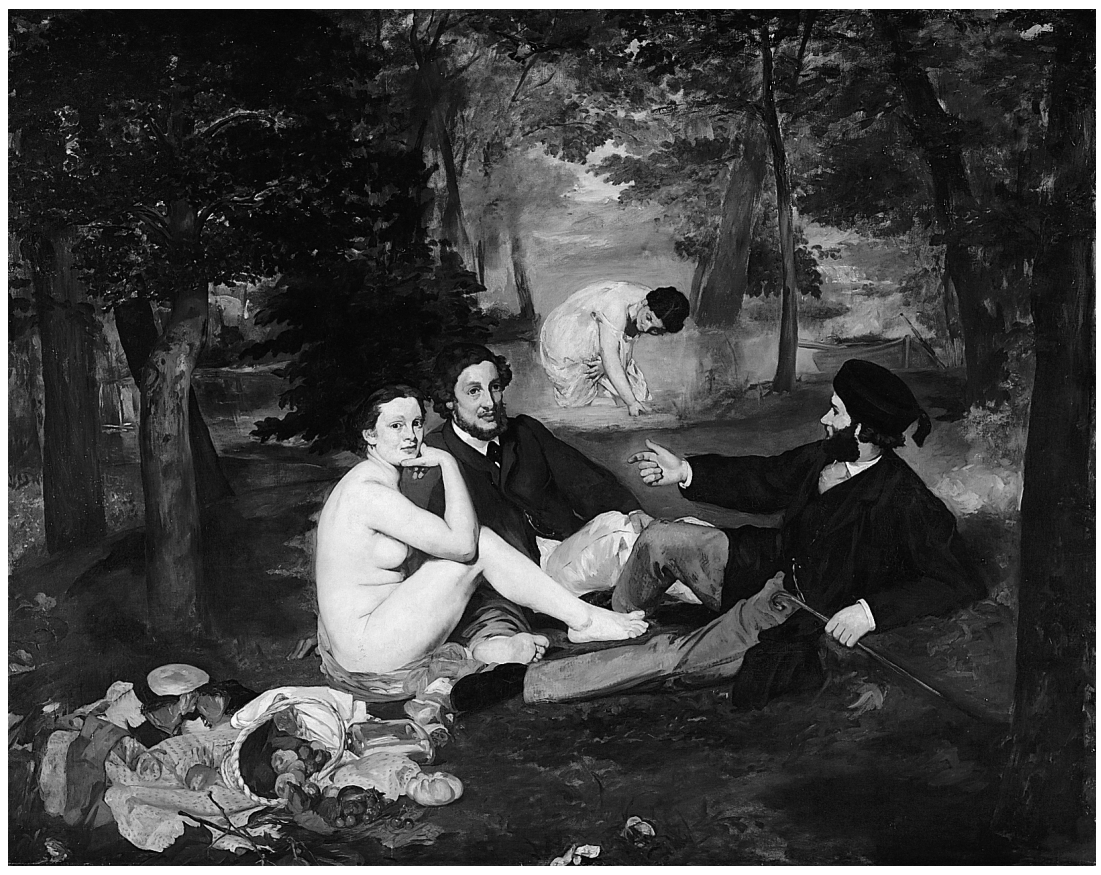
Omair Hussain: Critical theory today is concerned with a rejection of modern, bourgeois society, understood as being founded on an ideology of oppression. Your work is marked by a return to the bourgeois philosopher par excellence: Hegel. How does Hegel's articulation of bourgeois subjectivity provide a way of thinking about the limits and potentials of modern society? How can we understand Hegel's framework as being critical?

Robert B. Pippin: Hegel is the first to argue that philosophy has an historical and a diagnostic task. A traditional understanding of philosophy is distinguished by two central, normative questions, and its conviction that these questions can be answered by the exercise of pure human reason: What ought we to think, and what ought we to do? To Hegel, this conception of philosophy is insufficient and, in the Kantian sense, un-critical—that is, not aware of the conditions of its own possibility. Instead, Hegel argues that philosophy's task is the comprehension of its own time in thought. That's an extremely powerful and influential formulation, although it is not at all clear exactly what it means.

Certainly, Hegel has in mind the self-justification of the use of coercive violence by a single authority in the state against all other members, otherwise known as politics. Under what justification could the coercive power of law, the ability to take away one's freedom, operate? Hegel was skeptical of the "pure," practically rational inquiry into this problem undertaken, say, by Plato's *Republic* or Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Human rationality, to Hegel, is not a faculty possessed by human beings, like sensibility or the imagination, which they exercise in isolation as monadic units. He thinks of rationality as the considerations we offer each other when our actions affect what others would otherwise be able to do. Rationality is a social practice and it has a history, as do the elements connected with it, such as the concept of subject or agent.

There are two senses in which Hegel is critical. First, in a way that is deeply indebted to Kant, he calls for rigorous reflection on the conditions that make possible reason, that make possible the exercise of justifying ourselves to each other. Hegel thereby articulates how various attempts at such justification have broken down. Out of these failures he tells a story about how, considering the history of these practices, Western societies have come to get better at this kind of justification. He ended up thinking that the society he saw coming into view in 1820s Germany had gotten so much better in this regard that the basic institutional structure of that society counted as something like a resolution of the problem. What features of that society inspired such optimism? First and foremost, the distinction between the state and civil society. It is a gross confusion to think of the state as nothing but the administrative arm of modern civil society; for Hegel, civil society encompasses the institutions of property, the accumulation of capital, the regulation of contract, the formation of social clubs, the private exercises of religion, and so on. Hegel argued that modern societies had made a distinction between the properly political and the merely administrative. He thought that the modern institutions of the so-called bourgeois or nuclear family, along with the existence of private property as a means to the realization of individuality and the representative *Rechsstaat,* the state governed by the rule of law, were adequate solutions to this problem because they embodied successful modes of reasoning. Hegel showed how in other societies, at other times, the considerations they advanced, on the basis of "because you are my serf, or a woman, or my wife," for instance, failed because they could not be offered and accepted by mutually equal subjects, which is the gold standard in Hegel's account.

Now, one sense in which Hegel is not critical follows from what I have just said: He thought he saw coming into view a resolution of this social conception of rationality in institutions that embody mutuality of subjectivity, or genuine equality, in a way that rises to a general resolution of the problem of practical rationality. Today, I do not think anyone in his or her right mind would argue this is true. So, a great deal of post-Hegelian philosophy has been committed to identifying what is going wrong and clarifying what the nature of the wrongness of post-Hegelian society is. Some of the categories you sometimes hear on the Left can be used in a purely moralistic way, suggesting that what's going wrong is that some people are taking advantage of others for their own gain. That is wrong, certainly, but the question is whether that moral category of injury to another for one's own gain adequately captures what's going wrong, in general. After all, that is *always* what's going wrong, in any society: There are criminals, egoists, and cruel and selfish people. The task of post-Hegelian philosophy has been to find a more concrete historical analysis committed to understanding how and why, in post-Hegelian societies, the strategies for justification are breaking down internally, as is visible in various social pathologies and other expressions of irrationality.



Édouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Oil on canvas 208 cm x 265.5 cm, 1862–1863 (Musée d'Orsay).

For Hegel, one crucial element of such an investigation was the history of fine art. One of the things I am working on is to understand what Hegel might have said about art created by Western artists after 1863. In particular, I have in mind the exhibition of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, the first modernist painting—an explosive and epochal event from which the West has not yet recovered.

OH: For some time now, the dominant model for what counts as critical in art, under the broad label "postmodernism," has consisted in the idea of "resistance": Art is critical insofar as it resists and challenges racist, sexist, classist, or generally authoritarian assumptions of modern bourgeois society. But this approach tends to

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Statement of Purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

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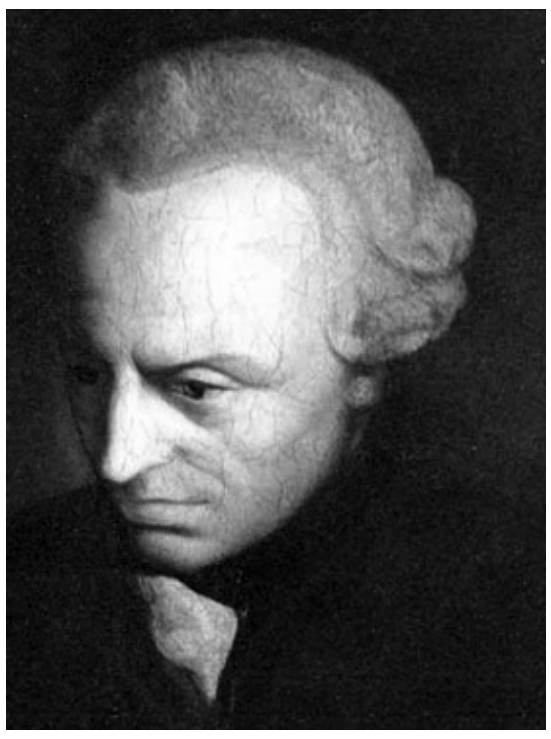
neglect the historical dimension of the peculiar problems modern society poses for art, and vice-versa. How is this critical potential of art, as Hegel understood it, expressed in the art practices and theory prevalent today—or has it simply been left behind?

RP: To answer that, one has to go back to a fundamental philosophical question: What distinct human need does art, as art, speak to? This question highlights a danger we court if we consider art nothing more than a kind of sensible embodiment of a politically critical idea. This is already a betrayal of what is distinctive about art. Things that simply embody and convey a political idea may have interesting and important functions when exhibited in galleries, but it poses the question, enormously disputed over the last 50 years, of art's *raison d'être*. Why should there be art? To ask this question seriously we have to be willing to concede that many things that are referred to, celebrated, and purchased as art might not be art. By extension, people can be wrong about what they think art is, as art.

With Hegel, you need four distinctions. First, "pre-art art," or art in the process of truly becoming art, such as the statuaries and architecture of the Egyptian world which is, to Hegel, in a way so frozen and dead that it is not yet the sensible embodiment of what he calls spirit, or *Geist*. Then there is "art art," referring to the one period in the history of the human race when Hegel thought art fulfilled its own nature perfectly: Greek art, sculpture, architecture, literature, and so forth. Thirdly there is "post-art art," or art in the process of overcoming itself as art. Hegel thinks of this mostly as romantic art, and especially the late romantic art of his own period. Finally there is what we just talked about, "non-art art," or art that is in contestation about its status, but which we might want to conclude is not really art, however valuable it may be in another respect. Now, if we hold onto the notion that there may be something distinctive that art contributes, it poses the question, "Contributes to what, exactly?" With Hegel, the official answer to that question is that art is an intuitive, sensible mode of intelligibility of the Absolute. By the Absolute he means some comprehensive understanding that we are both subjects of our lives—we run them, deciding what to think and what to do—yet we are at the same time objects. We are material objects in space and time, extended matter subject to the laws of nature, and we are potentially objects for other subjects, for whom we are nothing but objects in their way. What the Germans meant by the absolute was the final comprehension of the speculative truth that we are, in this sense, both object and subject at the same time.

Hegel argued, up until the later lectures in Berlin, that art was an indispensible mode of intelligibility of this crucial feature of human life. In that respect I think he would see the art of the 19th century, the art of Édoard Manet or Paul Cézanne, for example, as being politically and socially critical, despite the fact that most today do not understand such works as political at all. From the Hegelian point of view, every painting allegorizes its own relation to the beholder, and in doing so allegorizes the relation of social intersubjectivity and mutual understanding. If something is going wrong there, we should expect to see it in visual art. Clearly, something is going wrong in Manet. The conventions of pictorial credibility have begun to lose their hold. Manet's works are a direct attack on the illusion that the picture plane is transparent towards the seeing represented in post-Renaissance vanishing point and aerial perspective. The possibility of a context of intelligibility is being criticized by Manet in pictures like *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* or *Olympia*, where all the conventional notions of what



A portrait of Immanuel Kant by an unknown artist, 1790.

we would need in order to understand what the paintings are trying to tell us are under attack.

In that sense I do not think Hegel would regard the heavily conceptualized, polemical variety of art that you have called postmodern as being terribly effective. From a Hegelian point of view it is kind of boring. It makes the same point over and over again. There is no great mystery about merely the existence of oppression in the world. We can be reminded of it again and again, but after a while that tends to lose some of its zip, and the deeper question is what forms of mutual intelligibility are beginning to fail and how that can be most properly and determinately represented in art. It is in this regard, in short, that Hegel would have conceived of art as a political enterprise.

OH: Your response points to a peculiar bind in which modern art finds itself. "Post-art art" is actually art in the process of overcoming itself. This predicament is tragic, as your discussion of Manet suggests, but it also allows for a new significance. The uncertainty of post-art art gives it a freedom to take risks and transform itself. What did it mean for Hegel that post-art art is in the process of overcoming itself as art? Is this something to be lamented, or is there a progressive character to this self-overcoming?

RP: Hegel recognized how important art, and especially poetry, had become to the German society in which he lived. However, he also insisted that, compared with the significance of art in the tragic festivals of the ancient Greeks or in its religious function in medieval and early modern society, art would never again mean for us what it had meant to earlier societies. It would never recover that degree of importance.

Hegel had a lot of reasons for saying this, but I think Hegel made a terrible mistake in arguing that this equivalent, but incommensurable, mode of intelligibility of the basic problem of the Absolute no longer needed a sensible intuitive mode of intelligibility because we had understood it so well at the conceptual and rational practical level, because of various things he believed about the achievements of modern, bourgeois society. A bigv problem for anyone interested not only in Hegel, but also in the whole Left Hegelian critical tradition, is to try to figure out the non-self transcendence of art—that is, to figure out what actually is the continuing task for art in contemporary society, within these premises that Hegel has established.

OH: Despite the fact that Hegel saw emerging in society something like, as you put it, "a general solution to the problem," he also speaks to the incomplete, or unrealized, character of subjectivity in modern society. In contrast, most critical social theory since has rejected the category of subjectivity as an Enlightenment "illusion" that we should rid ourselves of. But if we understand subjectivity in modern society as a task, rather than a fact to be affirmed or rejected, the question becomes far more interesting. What do you think Hegel would have to say about such renunciations of "subjectivity"?

RP: This kind of critique of human subjectivity is essentially the result of those Paul Ricouer called the "masters of suspicion": Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. These are the first to suggest that the domain of conscious intention, decision, and judgment is merely an appearance, while the true determinates of what we take ourselves to be consciously determining are actually inaccessible to consciousness. The domain of our conscious attentiveness is a kind of illusion, a pretension to run the show of our own lives, whereas it is actually some manifestation of the relation between the mode of production and the relations of production in a given society, or the will to power, or the unconscious. What poststructuralism did, which is essentially a post-Heideggerian phenomenon, is intensify the skepticism about the possibility of running any show, by destabilizing the attempt to identify these so-called true forces of determination—the unconscious, the will to power, economic relations of class, and so on. Such an intense skepticism that we could ever come to any determination about those latent forces leaves one in a of condition of complete indeterminacy—a "floating signifier."

The central response from the Hegelian tradition we have been discussing is that the conclusion of utter indeterminacy points immediately to its own practical unintelligibility. In other words, suppose you are convinced that human subjectivity, in this somewhat crude sense of "running the show," is an illusion. What would it be to properly acknowledge this fact, in one's life, from the first-person point of view? Are you supposed to wait around indefinitely, to see what your indeterminate forces do? There's some enormous overcorrection in the history of Western thought since roughly Marx and Nietzsche, in which all sorts of babies are being thrown out with all kinds of bath water. The dimension of a free life that Hegel is interested in has not, by virtue of these critiques, been superseded or gone away, unless we have some way of understanding what it would be to actually acknowledge such a departure in life. The postmodernist critique of subjectivity is "overdone" to the extent that it leaves us with no concrete way to understand what the actual position of subjectivity should look like to an agent.

The problem of freedom, as Hegel understands it, is not freedom from the interference of external impeding forces. Hegel is one of the first to offer a critique of the liberal democratic tradition for its emphasis on isolating the realm of entitlement to mere non-interference. You can be un-coerced, and do what you take to be appropriate, and still have a relationship to what you do that is not identification, that is not affirmative toward it. We are finite beings, of course. Much of what we do falls within a constructed realm of possibilities that we do not determine. But, for Hegel, what is crucial is the kind of recognitive relation between that realm of possibilities and what you actually do, and the conditions for you to be able to enjoy that kind of identification are social and public. They are largely determined by the kind of world you grew up in, or the kind of world you have to deal with when you are grown up. So the problem of freedom, for Hegel and those who follow him, is not freedom from external constraint, but the establishment of the social conditions under which the life you lead seems to be the one you have determined.

OH: This brings to mind the relationship between Hegel's philosophy and his own historical moment, when history plausibly seemed to be the story of humanity's movement toward freedom and rationality. As you have pointed out, this sounds naïve to us today. But then how are we to account for how our world is, at least in some sense, historically continuous with Hegel's moment, and yet also seems to have no place for the possibility of free, self-legislating subjects?

RP: First, certain aspects of the character of modern society are not anticipated by Hegel, Feuerbach, or Marx. A

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number of things make part of Hegel's analysis difficult to reconceptualize and potentially even irrelevant. Hegel is constantly attentive to what he calls the mediations of the relationships between the individual and the universal norms of the society. These mediations encompass the features of society that make it so you are not facing the requirements of normative justifiability in your society as an abstract individual. A big part of the question, "What should I do?" consists in figuring out what to do qua mother, qua father, qua businessman or businesswoman, qua citizen, qua soldier. One of Hegel's most important insights is that society degenerates into a kind of abstract moralism if we do not understand that the embodiment of some of these universal norms in concrete roles is not bad, but is actually the only way for finite human beings to ever instantiate these norms of mutuality and equality that Hegel is interested in. But this requires a structure of mediations that is very thin in contemporary society. Hegel would never have anticipated the mass commercial culture that we have right now. The sheer size of it makes the idea of mediation difficult. The intense need for the constant expansion of the economy has created a culture that requires both saturation via need creation, or advertising, and new techniques and powers to create these needs. If you had confronted Marx with things like the billion dollar market in diet dog food that exists today, he likely would have thrown up his hands in despair, and justly so. Part of what we are discovering is that there is no limit thus far. When applied to contemporary society, the Hegelian framework, with its concentration on things like mediation, is in some ways just not going to fit. The degree of anonymization of contemporary society has called for a new form of analysis.

At some point the Hegelian categories just run out, and then you get the Frankfurt School's account, and the accounts of structuralism, poststructuralism, Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis, all of them trying to get at what's going wrong in the basic, fundamental structure of human desire formation. Let's say that the problem is deeper than one Hegel could deal with. Nietzsche was one of the first to see that the problem in sustaining a massive common culture is that the resultant form of life sustains no great desire. It is flat, boring, and uninspirational. Hegel did not discover this issue. It would have astonished him that, just as Enlightenment rationalism was beginning to pay off on all its great claims, with decreased infant mortality, public health, the rule of law, and so on, all the great artists and intellectuals of 19th century Europe rose up in disgust and said, "No, it's not what we wanted." It was the beginning of the great bourgeois self-hatred that you see so much of in art.

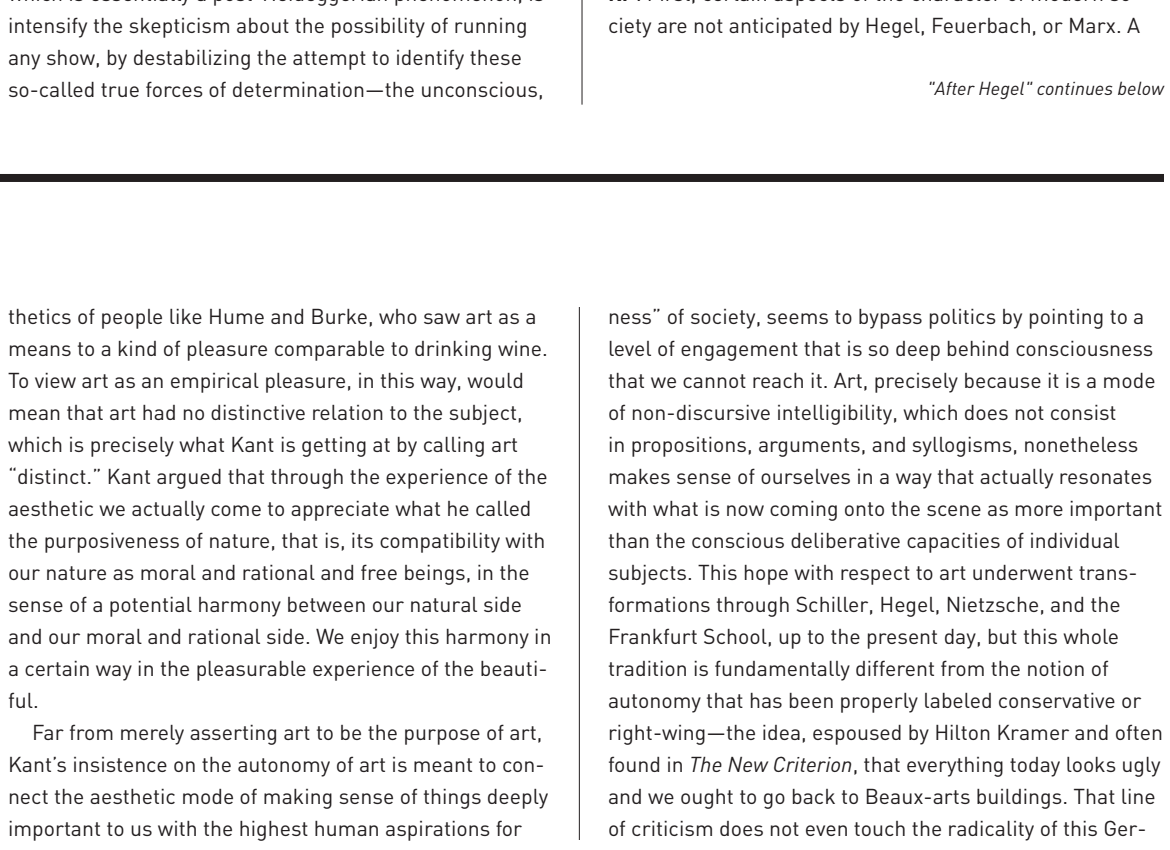
I don't have an adequate answer to what kind of extension and replacement of this Hegelian account of the mediated levels of rational society is needed to account for this vast mess of manipulation and desire creation that we have in the contemporary world. It even confounds the idea of unified political action, because the problem seems so much deeper—how does political action reach to such fundamental levels of desire, excitement, sustainability? Everything seems to be prior to any possible political action. That is one of the great conundrums of our day. We seem to be creating more reasons why these problems are not reachable by rational discourse. Yet, it is obviously dangerous to respond to this situation by aestheticizing politics, in the manner of the National Socialists, with the big rallies, uniforms, and flags.

Nonetheless, some dimension of what Hegel was interested in is not irrelevant. A dynamic, self-correcting process within society, however bounded it may be by things it cannot really affect, still appears to be at work. We are all living through perhaps the greatest social transformation in the history of the human race: the end of a gender-based division of labor. Why did that happen, after five thousand years of human civilization? One can still point to what German social theorists called the *Spuren der Vernunft*, or "traces of reason," continuing to operate in history.

OH: To return to art, then, and its inseparability from larger social questions, one of the things at stake in the idea of artistic autonomy is the possibility that something could be an end in itself, for itself. In the past this autonomy has been understood in terms of the subject being able to sympathize with this possibility of being an end in itself. However, in discussions of art today, autonomy has come to be widely seen as a conservative category. What do you think it means that we have now come to express such skepticism, and perhaps even contempt, for autonomy?

RP: There are two major meanings of the autonomy of art. The one you are taking about, which tends to be labeled conservative, is the strand of late 19th century and early 20th century *l'art pour l'art*, or "art for art's sake." All art has to do in order to be worthy is to be beautiful. There is no purpose, function, or end served by being beautiful other than being beautiful, and one takes a certain pleasure in the irrelevant nobility of the existence of beautiful things. However, in the German tradition, the autonomy of art meant something very different, going back to Kant's insistence that art should not be viewed as merely a means to the pleasure of the subject, nor only as an implement of religious worship or political glory. Such views entailed a profound miscategorization of the distinctness of the aesthetic intelligibility of what matters to us. Kant was the one who started the idea of conceiving of art in a completely new way, not connected to politics, religion, or even philosophy. Art was a distinct modality of making sense. What really excited the Germans so much was Kant's insistence that this way of making sense was sensible. For Kant it was a form of pleasure, but a distinct kind of pleasure, in the apprehension of the beautiful. This distinctness of art should not be understood the way prior classical aesthetics had understood the value of art in terms of perfectionism, the representation of a perfect ideal, nor should it be understood as sensible in terms of the empiricist aesthetics of people like Hume and Burke, who saw art as a means to a kind of pleasure comparable to drinking wine. To view art as an empirical pleasure, in this way, would mean that art had no distinctive relation to the subject, which is precisely what Kant is getting at by calling art "distinct." Kant argued that through the experience of the aesthetic we actually come to appreciate what he called the purposiveness of nature, that is, its compatibility with our nature as moral and rational and free beings, in the sense of a potential harmony between our natural side and our moral and rational side. We enjoy this harmony in a certain way in the pleasurable experience of the beautiful.

Far from merely asserting art to be the purpose of art, Kant's insistence on the autonomy of art is meant to connect the aesthetic mode of making sense of things deeply important to us with the highest human aspirations for self-understanding and the realization of freedom, because it is only in terms of our destiny as free moral and rational beings, subjects of our own life, that the experience of nature as having a kind of complement to that destiny is so pleasurable. It is a complicated position, but the autonomy of art for Kant is the insistence that it is not for politics, religion, or pleasure, rather than autonomy in the sense that it does not have any other importance aside from being art. For Kant it has profound importance, especially in terms of the problem we discussed earlier: So much of the modern layout of the problem, the hard-to-pin-down but pervasive sense of the "wrongness" of society, seems to bypass politics by pointing to a level of engagement that is so deep behind consciousness that we cannot reach it. Art, precisely because it is a mode of non-discursive intelligibility, which does not consist in propositions, arguments, and syllogisms, nonetheless makes sense of ourselves in a way that actually resonates with what is now coming onto the scene as more important than the conscious deliberative capacities of individual subjects. This hope with respect to art underwent transformations through Schiller, Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Frankfurt School, up to the present day, but this whole tradition is fundamentally different from the notion of autonomy that has been properly labeled conservative or right-wing—the idea, espoused by Hilton Kramer and often found in *The New Criterion*, that everything today looks ugly and we ought to go back to Beaux-arts buildings. That line of criticism does not even touch the radicality of this German Idealist and Romantic tradition that starts in the early 19th century and extends into the present day.



Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, Oil on canvas 130.5 cm x 190 cm, 1863 (Musée d'Orsay).

OH: You mentioned the Frankfurt School as an attempt to continue thinking about autonomy as understood by the German Idealist tradition. Something in Adorno's work that seems to bear on this discussion is his insight that the ways in which we, as individuals in late capitalism, confront the autonomous artwork tell us something about how we experience the possibility of freedom. We experience

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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.'"[8]

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.[9]) 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.[10] 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. For this, Lenin has never been forgiven. But, precisely for this, Lenin needs to be remembered. | **P**

1. Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).
2. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 143.
3. 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 1915. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/granat/ch02.htm>.
4. Cited by Benjamin in "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings* vol. 4 1938–40 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2003), 395.
5. Korsch, "Marxism and Philosophy," in *Marxism and Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Fred Halliday (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 67–68.
6. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (1902), available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/i.htm>.
7. Peter Nettl, "The German Social Democratic Party 1890–1914 as Political Model," *Past and Present* 30 (April 1965).
8. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in Robert Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader* 2nd edition (New York: Norton, 1978), 602.
9. Rosa Luxemburg, "Blanquism and Social Democracy" (1906). Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/06/blanquism.html>.
10. Adorno, "Critique," *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

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the autonomy of the artwork pathologically, painfully, in the recognition that the artwork calls for something we have been unable to arrange for. Might this pathological character help us get a better handle on the discontent with the notion of autonomy, in both senses you have discussed, that seems to have become more prevalent and deeper, especially from the 1960s to the present?

RP: I do not think so. Adorno is talking about high modernist art, specifically. He is like Clement Greenberg in this respect. The way that fine art can serve as a kind of critique, as an experience of negativity, is precisely by virtue of its super-formal properties. The art he's talking about is music, and he's especially interested in Webern, Berg, and music that defies the traditional understanding of the comprehension of music. In this refusal, in stripping itself down to its pure formality, such art does not allow itself to be incorporated into the culture industry. This refusal is one moment of a rather indeterminate resistance taken up for the sake of what will not make sense within the conventions of the culture industry, and hence is a site of resistance.

I have a deep problem with Adorno as a theorist of postmodernism because his basic philosophical outlook is that the modern Enlightenment enterprise, by which he means everything from modern natural science as the supreme cognitive authority in the world, to capitalism as the private ownership of the means of productions to an extensively concentrated degree, creates what he calls "identity thinking." That is to say, it creates a situation in which our conceptual norms of how the world is become ironclad. Whatever does not meet them is excluded as irrelevant, irrational, or marginal. Adorno thinks there is a conceptual hunger, or passion, to identify the elements of the real or the human with the kind of things we already have available to measure and conceptualize those things, and this entails an imposition of a particular, self-interested form of rationality and conceptualization. Successfully prosecuting this identification excludes potential disruptions to it or critiques of it. Art is upheld as a potential disruption of this identification, as something that falls out of the great enterprise of the Enlightenment, capitalist machine.

There are many aspects of Adorno's thought I respect, but at its a core, I think Adorno has a terribly naïve and unsophisticated view of how the Enlightenment works, and hence a very Romantic and not terribly interesting view of modern art as the attempt to interrupt the capitalist and Enlightenment identification process. Adorno is willing to say the relationship between freedom as a possibility and unfreedom in the modern world has become so intertwined that these moments of resistance do not really have much of a future, that he can only hope they will keep alive this aspiration of resistance, until the possibility of some alteration of the social conditions, some collapse at the end of the so-called "dialectic" of Enlightenment. I'm not at all sympathetic to that way of looking at art.

OH: But it seems Adorno's treatment of instrumental reason is precisely an attempt to grapple with the post-Hegelian problem of how to realize freedom in an unfree world. Adorno suggests that capitalist society reproduces unfreedom, not merely politically, at the hands of fascists and ultra right-wingers, but even on the fundamental level of how we think about the world.

RP: But how far does one go with that? There is the thesis that National Socialism and the Holocaust was not an aberration in the development of Western Enlightenment, but the logical outcome. Even if the question of Enlightenment has become troubled in many ways, I'm willing to say that its fulfillment would definitely not look like fascism. I would avoid speaking of any "logical outcome," in this sense. I think you could say something like this: The official culture of modernity, by which we mean the supreme and usually exclusive authority in knowledge of natural science, the exclusive legitimacy of private or super-private ownership of capital to the point that vast amounts of capital accrue to a very limited number individuals, and so forth, ultimately turns out to be profoundly unsatisfying to human beings and leads to all kinds of pathologies, miseries, and psychological dysfunctions. In the 20th century, the reaction to this intense dissatisfaction took two radically different, but extreme and very dangerous paths. One was the culture of blood and soil primitivism and the worship of the ancestral, rooted in a nostalgia to get out of modernity by going back behind it. Thus National Socialism, for instance, used all the tools of modernity, tanks, telephones, and movies alike, but in the service of an essentially pre-modern, mythic culture. The other path was to try to accelerate as fast as possible out of modernity into the postmodern future, no matter how many people have to die. This was the Soviet experiment, based in the idea that the forceful manipulation of society could create a post-capitalist society by force of will. That, I think, is the mystery: How did it come about that this essentially pacific, Enlightenment bourgeois culture prompted reactions as extreme and violent as the two great reactions to modernization in the 20th century, namely National Socialist primitivism, and utopianism gone mad in the Soviet Experiment?

OH: How adequate do you think Marx was, in his own time, at attempting to grapple with this post-Hegelian problem of emancipation in the context of a radically transforming society?

RP: Marx was better than anyone else at the time. I am sympathetic to what I take to be the aura of your question: These issues are deeply historicizable and the Marxian analysis of the emergence of modern, urban, labor-intensive industrial capitalism was the work of great genius. The mistake is to think Marx had solved the riddle of history, that he had found a way to rise out of "each time, comprehended in its own thought," with "anytime, comprehended by the same thought." If we are going to take seriously the idea of projecting this Hegelian framework about rationality into the future, we have to take seriously the necessity of building on the Marxian analysis so that late capitalism is met by an analysis that's as up-to-date as the phenomenon.

OH: But one significant, specifically Hegelian dimension of the problem Marx was trying to solve was the idea that philosophy, in order to be adequate to the post-Hegelian moment, marked as it was by what seemed like a reversal in bourgeois society and the Enlightenment gone wrong, necessarily entailed the task of attempting to transform the object—that is, the world. What would it mean to understand Marx's preoccupation with economics, or capitalism, as a philosophical and historical enterprise? Marx did not begin with economics or capitalism; he began with Hegelian philosophy. His concern with economics was an attempt to grasp the way in which an economic system had come to shape social life, and totalize social life, including subjective consciousness, in a negative way—in a way that fettered the realization of freedom. In this sense, I would consider the critique of political economy to be Marx's attempt to grapple with the structure that has created a crucial problem after Hegel: the problem of diagnosing the irrationality of an unfree society. Does that seem at all plausible to you?

RP: Insofar as Marx is the kind of Left Hegelian you say, I am for him. Insofar as Marx, understood that way, has an analytic structure that helps us understand life in the 21st century, I want to hear it. But I am not sure, right now, what such an analytic structure would be.

What interests me the most in what you said is the question of what it means for human subjects collectively to direct, to control, their own destiny as free subjects. That is subject to so many different kinds of interpretation. Again, for me, contemporary art is one of the interesting scenes in which this issue plays out. I do not think it plays out by way of people creating art for the sake of political ends, as a sort of consciously directed political program. People can make objects that do that, but I think the heritage of art is as important to its nature as its projection into a future. It is by being true to the continuing, unique heritage of art that we come to a position in which we begin to understand ourselves as capable of directing the future in a way that is unique to the aesthetic mode of intelligibility. My own view is that great art is now happening in photography, in the creation of large photographs that serve as the inheritors of the conventions of easel paintings, and in some extraordinarily powerful video art that has emerged. I do not find it happening in installation art, or conceptual art, which died out almost as soon as it appeared. It became stale and repetitive in a way that indicates it was untrue to the non-conceptual, integral nature of aesthetic sensibility to begin with, and now it just seems boring and trite. Who can go to a museum, see a Joseph Beuys piece scattered all over the floor, and find it interesting anymore? It is a one-off deal. But if you see a video by Douglas Gordon or Anri Sala, I believe you are seeing great art alive in a way that is going to be alive 150 or 200 years from now. I think it is alive, not because it is drenched in the ideals of political activism, but precisely because it is not—and because it is not, it is.

Q & A

Returning to an earlier point in the discussion, is there a directionality to these traces of rationality that continue to linger in post-Hegelian society? These traces, the degree to which they are progressive, suggest that society is in the process of rational development—a division of labor not based in gender, for instance. However, all the problems of the post-Hegelian period of bourgeois society remain. In light of these traces, how would one approach the problem of "regression," which Adorno sought to clarify?

RP: We can stop for a minute and ask why a free life would or should be the most important desideratum of modernity. Certainly, some people would say a secure life, or a prosperous life, is more important. We think that, even at the cost of prosperity and security, a free life is more important, without even knowing very much about what we mean by it. It is the common circulatory word in Ameican politics. We have this currency about leading a free life, determining our own future, but we know the conditions for that are not satisfied purely in terms of external constraints being applied or not being applied. We know that there is some deep inner relationship between a person and his or her deeds that requires a certain kind of society and has to be actualized in some form of non-alienated identification with what one does as truly being one's own. The extent to which there are both progressive and regressive moments in this presents a very puzzling question. For a long time now, we have been in a pretty regressive moment in the United States. Since the 1960s, I would say. We have been contracting into a much more conservative, libertarian, neoconservative notion of what freedom means, and this has created a range of pathologies, both economic and cultural, that we are finding extremely difficult to deal with. Half the country is stoned on one thing or the other other, while the other half is drunk. The mind boggles at the sheer increase in the signs of deep social fraying. Why do such pathologies occur? Hegel's not very good about that. He is good about the ideal losing hold because of them. The kind of deep analysis we need for the question why these occur, in both the sociological and philosophical sense, I do not think anyone has provided. There are traces of reason everywhere, from the achievement of something like a division of labor not based in gender, or the extension of rights to prisoners over the last 50 years, for instance. And yet we are living, overall, in a regressive state. | **P**

Lenin's liberalism

Chris Cutrone

At the 2011 Left Forum, held at Pace University in NYC between March 18-21 , Platypus hosted a conversation on "Lenin's Marxism." Panelists Chris Cutrone of Platypus, Paul LeBlanc of the International Socialist Organization, and Lars T. Lih, the author of Lenin Reconsidered: "What is to be Done" in Context *were asked to address, "What was distinctive about Vladimir Lenin's Marxism? What was its relationship to the other forms of Marxism and Marxists of his era? Was Lenin orthodox or heterodox? Was there a "unity" to Lenin's political thought, as Georg Lukács argued, or do his major works*—What is to Be Done? (1902), Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism (1916), The State and Revolution (1917), "Left-Wing Communism:" An Infantile Disorder? (1920)—*express distinctive and even contradictory phases in Lenin's political development? How did Lenin's Marxism overcome—or not —other competing forms of Marxism? How should we understand Lenin's historical contribution to Marxism, today?" Our last issue (PR #35) included opening remarks by Paul LeBlanc, what follows below are Chris Cutrone's opening remarks.*

Introduction

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"[1] 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?

The Frankfurt School Critical Theorist Theodor 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.[2]

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 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.[3]

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 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."[4] Even though the crisis of capital or bourgeois society grew, the question was whether the crisis *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 prog-

" Lenin's liberalism" continues below

Lenin's liberalism, continued from above

ress 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.[5]

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 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?[6]

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-centrality of Marxism taken to its fullest flower. But there was a rationale to this. 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 (Kautsky waffled on the issue). Lenin and Luxemburg wanted to split the Second International from its reformists (or, "opportunists").

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. 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?

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.[7] 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.

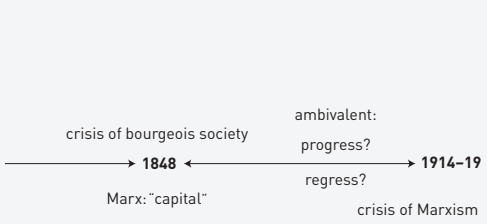
The problem of party-politics

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."

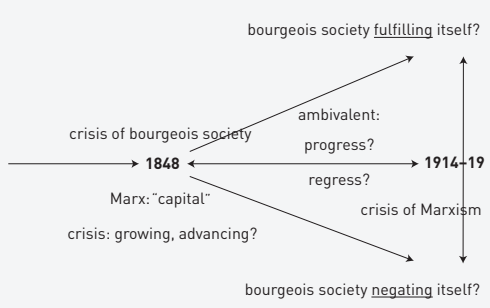
This problem of modern politics and its forms recurred

" Lenin's liberalism" continues on page 4

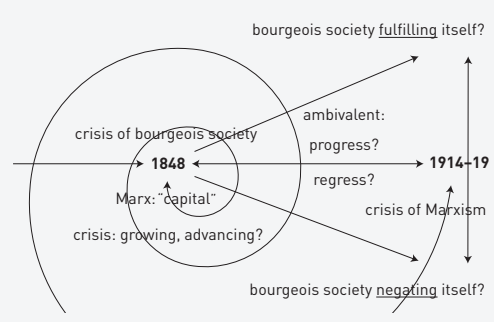
Lenin: history not linear but spiral



Lenin regarding 1848 from the perspective of 1914: Why return to Marx? The crisis of Marxism is crisis of bourgeois society



The crisis of capital has grown, but has it advanced? 1848–1914 divergence



How could the crisis of Marxim be revolutionary? How to reattain 1848?