Trotsky's Marxism

Ian Morrison

At the 2011 Left Forum, held at Pace University in NYC between March 18–21, Platypus hosted a conversation on "Trotsky's Marxism." Panelists Ian Morrison (Platypus), Susan Williams (Freedom Socialist Party), and Jason Wright (International Bolshevik Tendency) were asked to address, "What was Trotsky's contribution to revolutionary Marxism? At one level, the answer is clear. Above even his significance as organizer of the October insurrection and leader of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War, what makes Trotsky a major figure in the history of Marxism is his status as the leader of the Left Opposition and, later, his founding of the Fourth International. But this panel asks whether stating this fact is sufficient for understanding Trotsky's Marxism, or whether this might not in fact merely beg the question. The issue remains: What was it in Trotsky's evolution from the period of 1905 through the Russian Revolution of 1917 that allowed him to become the leader of the Left Opposition and the great Marxist critic of Stalinism in the 1920s and 1930s? What of Trotsky, rather than 'Trotsky-ism'?" An earlier issue (PR #35) included included a transcript of Jason Wright's opening remarks. What follows are a slightly modified version of Ian Morrison's opening remarks.

TO SPEAK ABOUT TROTSKY'S MARXISM, and not simply Trotsky himself, is to speak, above all, about the distance traveled from the First to the Second Internationals, as well, of course, as that from the Third to the Fourth. In what manner had political organizations and the discontents those organizations sharpened changed over time, from the Gotha program to the Erfurt program, from the Zimmerwald Conference to the April Theses, all the way to the Transitional Program? The question of Trotsky's Marxism also seems to presuppose that an essential framework, namely the critique of political economy, somehow remains valid throughout these periods, and that hence the idea of being a Marxist is stable through time. That is, the question of Trotsky's Marxism suggests that through events such as 1848 and the Paris Commune, and, during Trotsky's lifetime, the 1905 and October Revolutions—however cataclysmic they were, however profoundly they transformed the political landscape—still, somehow, Marx's original standpoint remains. There is no simple, straightforward approach to this.

Trotsky himself was attentive to changing circumstances, arguing that the Bolsheviks (and his leadership thereof) had left an indelible mark on the past, present, and future of Marxism. "Before Marxism became 'bankrupt' in the form of Bolshevism," he wrote on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the October Revolution,

> ...it had already broken down in the form of social democracy. Does the slogan 'Back to Marxism' then mean a leap over the periods of the Second and Third Internationals...to the First International? But it too broke down in its time. Thus in the last analysis it is a question of returning to the collected works of Marx and Engels. One can accomplish this historic leap without leaving one's study and even without taking off one's slippers. But how are we going to go from our classics (Marx died in 1883, Engels in 1895) to the tasks of a new epoch, omitting several decades of theoretical and political struggles, among them Bolshevism and the October Revolution? None of those who propose to renounce Bolshevism as an historically bankrupt tendency has indicated any other course. So the question is reduced to the simple advice to study [Marx's] *Capital*. We can hardly object. But the Bolsheviks, too, studied *Capital* and not badly either. This did not however prevent the degeneration of the Soviet state and the staging of the Moscow trials. So what is to be done?[1]

Trotsky's answer here, in short, is to study and deepen our understanding of Bolshevism from the present "Thermidorian Reaction" all the way back to the party's origins. No "Marxism" can be complete, Trotsky maintains, without taking up this task, and he himself inaugurated the work, particularly in *The Lessons of October* (1924), *The History of the Russian Revolution* (1930), and his autobiography, *My Life* (1930). It is curious, looking at this incomplete bibliography, how carefully Trotsky modulated the genre of his writing to fit different objectives: as a revolutionary politician, as a historian, and as a modern subject struggling to reflect on his own life. There is no other writer, it seems to me, who presents such a full account of the period in question. His insistence (and persistence) on this score tells us quite a bit about how he sought to register the profound discontents emerging during his lifetime and, subsequently, what it meant to be a "Marxist" in Trotsky's eyes. Clearly, Trotsky saw no need to reconstruct Marx's critique of political economy, which is not to say that he believed it to be anachronistic. On the contrary. But during the intervening history—between Marx's time and Trotsky's—it seems important to underscore that the object of critique had been transformed as well as the organizations that were being intersected. Turn-of-the-century social democracy and the post-war communist parties are, sociologically, quite unlike the political organizations

A photograph of Trotsky by Robert Capa taken in November 1932 in Copenhagen, Denmark. Trotsky memorably noted in that lecture, "Learned divers descend to the bottom of the ocean and there take photographs of mysterious fishes. Human thought, descending to the bottom of its own psychic sources must shed light on the most mysterious driving forces of the soul and subject them to reason and to will."

that made up the First International. In *The Lessons of October* Trotsky is addressing a political party of which he is a leader, and perhaps more importantly, one that is in power. The dangers and responsibilities of that organization ("the party") are first and foremost on his mind. The subsequent history makes it clear that when a political party loses its grasp on reality, its degeneration is rapid.

I believe that is one reason why Trotsky begins *The Lessons of October* with the curious claim that "we met with success in the October Revolution, but the October Revolution has met with little success in our press." Trotsky develops this claim well beyond a technical critique of the press. Rather, he implies that although the October Revolution appears "objectively" to have been a success, "subjectively" it potentially is not. For reasons that are by no means self-evident, this history is repressed. The party as an institution appears, then, not only as a means for revolutionary action, but also, potentially, as a means for evasion, a political obstacle *par excellence*. This claim, no doubt, is peculiar. How could a nation be mobilized without being fully cognizant of its intentions? How could the *desire* to overcome the status quo that had united disparate groups of men and women during "October" somehow be *forgotten, averted, recoiled from* by the very people who were mobilized by that desire to escape the present? There are many difficult questions here that go well beyond the typical condemnation of bureaucracy. In Trotsky's view the results are obvious enough, since he writes *The Lessons of October* as a response to failure in Germany. He argues that such a forgetful approach,

> though it may be subconscious—is, however, profoundly erroneous, and is, moreover, narrow and nationalistic. We ourselves may never have to repeat the experience of the October Revolution, but this does not at all imply that we have nothing to learn from that experience. We are a part of the International, and the workers in all other countries are still faced with the solution of the problem of their own 'October.' Last year we had ample proof that the most advanced Communist parties of the West had not only failed to assimilate our October experience but were virtually ignorant of the actual facts.[2]

On first glance it may appear that there is a question of sheer ignorance. There is also the technical problem of simply producing and supplying the intellectual material. These are hardly irrelevant factors. Nonetheless, these factors do not explain the phenomenon itself, especially since this is a problem that has deepened immensely over time. Historical distance has rendered the problem even more opaque, as "narrow and nationalistic" sentiments have only grown. The question worth asking is: Why is it the case that the great struggle associated with Trotsky took the form of a "historical struggle," a struggle to remember the past, and not merely a struggle of agitation and force?

Marx describes how the leaders of the French Revolution emulated "the Roman republic and the Roman empire."[3] Socialists in the nineteenth century sought to revert to the craftsman's guilds of the pre-

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The Platypus Review

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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.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–2,500 words, but longer pieces will also be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: *review_editor@platypus1917.org*. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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Trotsky's theory of art

Bret Schneider

*At its Third Annual Convention, held at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago between April 29-May 1—Platypus hosted a conversation on "*Art, Culture, and Politics: Marxist Approaches.*" Platypus members Omair Hussain, Lucy Parker, Pac Pobric, and Bret Schneider sought to address "What might the problems of aesthetics and culture have to do with the political project of the self-education of the Left?" What follows are Bret Schneider's opening remarks.*

IT IS NOT SELF-EVIDENT why Trotsky would devote such time in 1924, in the midst of social revolution, to the history and prospects of Russian literature. Problematizing the unproblematized expanse of contemporary art production through Leon Trotsky's writings on art may initially appear counterintuitive. Though he is well-known for his journalistic exploits as a leader of the Bolshevik Revolution as a and as the "last man standing" from the Second International, an art critic Trotsky was not, and so his central book, *Literature and Revolution* (hereafter referred to as *LR*), appears as an odd duck. Nevertheless, *LR* scintillates with original artistic revelations and even a *new theory* of art, and one gets the impression that such unprecedented clarity, and even an unrivaled comprehensive perspective of the diverse art of his moment, is the artifact of, and only of, the ebullience of a new world in the making that now appears petrified. That is, the way art was framed was revolutionized—or in the state of revolutionizing itself—in various ways through *LR*. If, as Gregg Horowitz said in a recent discussion on contemporary critical theory,[1] we are standing in the way of history, if we are blocking the passage of a new world articulated long ago, then it might behoove us to investigate the original stakes of this historical venture and use it as a foil for the confounded present. These stakes included a new culture and a new art as only one of its elements, but such a new culture was clearly an integral concern for Leon Trotsky.

LR is a theory of history parallel to Trotsky's 1906 *Results and Prospects*. There, Trotsky assesses the 19th century bourgeois revolutions, and what unfulfilled latencies seemed to lead to their redemption by a socialist revolution (in 1905, but foreshadowing 1917). Trotsky's examination was not merely a "cause and effect" study, but a living theory of how the revolution also changed the meaning of history and in what ways. will not *LR* is a similar exegesis of bourgeois art, what its implications were for the self-determining *constitution* of a *new* culture, and how the new demands of revolution changed the way traditional art forms are and might come to be perceived. In this sense, *LR* is an artifact of a political *becoming,* the postulating of a new culture beyond class, as a *category*, not a reality attained by Bolshevik revolution, or to be identified with it. A decade earlier, Lukács wrote a Hegelian study on the novel, articulating the novel as distinct from pre-modern literature by way of its being a form in flux, a self-constituting form in the process of its own transformation; in other words the novel is the paramount modern literary form specifically because it is a social *problem,* not a social *solution,* in a similar sense to how *reification* is a new problem to be resolved, and with something new to be gained by resolving it. This means framing political and artistic forms as problems, though: problems of tradition, how to depart from it, of the newfound contradictions between the individual and society, the new as the old in distress, as only some examples. Form in flux, open to new possibilities, co-developed with the new subject or the new human, as Trotsky framed it, is also why Benjamin later opened his "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" essay with a new theory of the receiver: "Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties."[2] By the time Trotsky wrote *LR*, the modern becoming—a departure away from everything about the old world, but one that redeems it through abstract relationships with it—which Lukács articulated in the novel form had become such an inescapable problem that new, dynamic forms, unseen and unprecedented, were unanimously called for by social revolution, which sought to problematize this autonomy of art to pursue new, self-determining courses. Thus, Trotsky's letter to *Partisan Review* in 1938 is concerned with overcoming the old world's ideology of too easily *rectifying* art and politics, instead of understanding the newfound open possibility of each as a problem:

> Art, like science, not only does not seek orders, but by its very essence, cannot tolerate them. Artistic creation has its laws—even when it consciously serves a social movement. Truly intellectual creation is incompatible with lies, hypocrisy and the spirit of conformity. Art can become a strong ally of revolution only in so far as it remains faithful to itself.[3]

Trotsky echoes—or prefigures, or both—Benjamin's idea that art can only have the correct political "tendency" if it has aesthetic "quality," an idea that would later influence Adorno's aesthetic theory, in the sense that what Adorno later identified as the *incomprehensibility* of art is the precondition for greater reflection and a more adequate social reality wi. Every moment of Trotsky's theory argues the autonomy of art, recently freed, and not constricted by political "reality." In a sense, Trotsky is the first non-philistine, because he is arguing against a newfound possibility of philistinism, depending on which way international politics will go. In other words, there is an analogy to be drawn between Rosa Luxemburg's "socialism or barbarism?" insofar as Trotsky seems to be asking, "aesthetics or philistinism?" But what does this mean?

First, this can be illustrated by the very attentive historical and formal criticism of "pre-revolutionary" bourgeois literature: a newly constructed *tradition* that can be *constructively negated* (foreshadowing Greenberg's description of art as its "further entrenchment in the area of its competence," as well as Adorno's exhaustive ideas of "tradition"). This is where Trotsky contributes something absolutely new to the theory of art, and here does the previously unthinkable for Marxists. He promotes (and does not condemn) the art of the peasantry. This is not to say that he promotes the *politics* of the peasantry, but makes a significant distinction between art and the political sentiments contained in it. He defends the art over the artist. An idea emerges here of "the fellow traveler" of the proletarian socialist revolution, not identical to it, but parallel with it. Politics and art grasp each other *indirectly* for perhaps the first time, and the sheer inescapability of the revolution allows room for autonomous expressions of them that provide multiple, new, and dynamic perspectives that allow them to be seen more holistically, unobstructed by ideology. Regarding young peasant poets, Trotsky says,

> It is as if they feel for the first time that art has its own rights….Why do we relegate them to being "fellow-travellers" of ours? Because they are bound up with the Revolution, because this tie is still very unformed, because they are so very young, and because nothing definite can be said about their tomorrow….As if an artist ever could be "without a tendency," without a definite relation to social life, even though unformulated or unexpressed in political terms.[4]

Trotsky reconstructs Kliuev's literary peasant world in order to illuminate, from an alternate angle of different subjectivity, the dynamism of the revolution. The way Trotsky speaks of Kliuev's world is as a "tinsel fairyland," and that "a modern person cannot live in such an environment" (68). Kliuev's peasant world is portrayed as a narcotic experience whose apparent individual peace is also a foreboding of social awakening.

Through delimiting the autonomous formalism of art, Trotsky is able to construct an adequate image of cultural and political prospects previously unseen. Would Trotsky have been able to glean, concretely even, that the peasant world was in the process of withering away without literary investigation? Almost certainly. This raises the question of why it is necessary to retain multiple perspectives. Simply put, the achievement of multiple perspectives is an index of the crawling out of instrumental analyses. The exhaustive portrait of the individual peasant dream world throws into relief the radically different set of objects and subjects emerging in modern experience—the telephone, the train, the bustling development of metropolises, and the subjective openness of possibility, for example—in order to understand the world in flux more consciously. Similarly to the way Lukács thought that the short story would take grip of the transient world—or rather the way that he took seriously the novel's "half art" as a real expression of transforming social conditions—Trotsky perceived that social conditions exerted an influence on the form of Russian literature, demanding *études,* or sketches. It is easy to see how new cultural forms and mediums like radio, television, and so forth would soon come to pass, as continual transformations required to meet the needs of a "modern person", or a "new human" that needs art less and less, in accord with a society whose emancipated subjects are no longer bound to the continued suffering that is art's *raison d'être*.

What Trotsky sees in the literary works of the "fellow travelers" is an openness of perspective that they participate in, but are not the wholly constituting expression of, because their seemingly complete and self-subsistent worlds, what Adorno would later call their hermetically sealed quality, are open to a new form of *criticism* that sees them as "dissonant" with society but not outside of it. Art has a newfound ability to be dissonant with and therefore critical of the social totality. It is nowhere implied that even the most repulsive or "anti-Marxist" principles should be foreclosed by Marxist critique, but rather diagnosed to provide a portrait of social conditions at their most dynamic and heterogeneous. Even Kliuev's occasional anti-Leninism is a welcome critique for Trotsky. Art is not only *not* exempt from this, but is exemplary in its *problematic* symptomology. Regarding another young writer's confrontation with a new openness, Trotsky said, "One can take man, not only social, but even psycho-physical man and approach him from different angles—from above, from below, from the side, or walk all around him" (74). That he pathetically "steals up to him from below," evident through the literary form, shows that the old world fosters inadequate cliche assumptions of a "human nature" that need not exist. The autonomy to perceive humans from different angles artistically—which means a "formalist" problem—is a freedom opened up by political conditions, and one that implies the "new humans" Trotsky called for without even needing to enforce explicit ideology upon the art:

> Our Marxist conception of the objective social dependence and social utility of art, when translated into the language of politics, does not at all mean a desire to dominate art by means of decrees and orders. It is not true that we regard only that art as new and revolutionary which speaks of the worker, and it is nonsense to say that we demand that the poets should describe inevitably a factory chimney, or the uprising against capital! Of course the new art cannot but place the struggle of the proletariat in the center of its attention. But the plough of the new art is not limited to numbered strips. On the contrary, it must plough the entire field in all directions. Personal lyrics of the very smallest scope have an absolute right to exist within the new art. Moreover, the new man cannot be formed without a new lyric poetry. But to create it, the poet himself must feel the world in a new way. (143-144)

"Feeling the world in a new way" has resonance with us today as an intellectual *idea* specifically because it seems stifled. But the new feelings are, again, tied to the radically incomplete world in flux.[5]

> Life in Revolution is camp life. Personal life, institutions, methods, ideas, sentiments, everything is unusual, temporary, transitional, recognizing its temporariness and expressing this everywhere, even in names. Hence the difficulty of an artistic approach. The transitory and the episodic have in them an element of the accidental and the accidental bears the stamp of insignificance. The Revolution, taken episodically, appears quite insignificant. Where is the Revolution, then? Here lies the difficulty. Only he will overcome it who fully understands and feels the inner meaning of this episodic character and who will reveal the historic axis of crystallization that lies behind it. (76)

Art played a role in determining social totality by articulating the incompleteness of it. In *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács describes art as always saying, "'And yet!' to life. The creation of forms is the most profound confirmation of a dissonance."[6] Such a framework—endemic to Lukács's theory of the novel and Trotsky's theory of the fellow traveler, notwithstanding Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*—brings up a vast number of questions for the contemporary, and also forces some all too easy associations. Contemporary artworks are often framed not as the *problem,* but the solution—or at least there is not a clearly defined dissonance between an artwork and the society it expresses.

This is enough to warrant the question of whether or not what passes itself off as art today could even be called so, but I will leave that to the side. In contemporary artworks we are faced with similar formal problems to those that Trotsky faced. For instance, if Trotsky was critical of the many nefarious endeavors to create a permanent proletarian culture (e.g., artists enlisting in the *Proletkult*) because the proletariat was a transitional phase to a much broader human freedom yet to be determined, but certainly one beyond the primitive class divisions of "proletariat" and "bourgeois," what then can be said about the "radical" art activism of today that seeks to ally itself with a vague "working class" that is increasingly depoliticized? Is this alliance doomed to an eternal struggle? Moreover, Trotsky noticed that such political "commitments" were not without their compromising effects on the aesthetic experience and consequently the transformation of subjectivity. In order to "be pals with socialism and with the Revolution,"[7] Mayakovsky had to rely on antiquated cliché truisms that were backwards of modern life and articulated retrogression from Mayakovsky's earlier, more progressive imagery (using skulls as ashtrays is an amusing example of retrogressive imagery). Trotsky also saw this wanting to be "pals" with the people, or a "mass base" without distinction, as a return to the bourgeois intelligentsia in the 19th century, who,

> deprived of a cultural environment, sought support in the lower strata of society and tried to prove to the "people" that it was thinking only of them, living only for them and that it loved them "terribly." And just as the populists who went to the people were ready to do without clean linen and without a comb and without a toothbrush, so the intelligentsia was ready to sacrifice the "subtleties" of form in its art, in order to give the most direct and spontaneous expression to the sufferings and hopes of the oppressed. (143)

That is, such an appeal to the "people" disregards the "splintering" or dissonant pluralism that Trotsky saw as endemic to the most significant successes of the Left over the course of its history.

As another example, in much new "experimental" music we hear the sounds of Kliuev's "tinsel fairyland," the subtle droning of vintage synth gear, a nostalgia for a private world. The "music" is like a narcotic, a therapeutic substance applied to the subject to cure what ails it. Electronic music might have once been counted amongst those modern things, an artifact of a dynamic mutability, but one that is stillborn in a state of endless, almost unsustainable decay. One is reminded again of Trotsky's description of Kliuev, when we look at much recent album artwork. For example:

> A wheat and honey paradise: a singing bird on the carved wing of the house and a sun shining in jasper and diamonds. Not without hesitation does Kliuev admit into his peasant paradise the radio and magnetism and electricity. (67)

In new experimental music a social torpor is embellished and sublimated into an ornate sort of poverty. What does it mean that the bourgeois individual experience of art is still naturally occurring today, without its being formulated as the progressive crisis of its own withering away?

One could go on with new art forms hearkening back to the past, re-digesting those bourgeois, bohemian tropes that fail to die, in the futuristic aspects of new net art for example (Trotsky considered Futurism to be retrograde bohemianism), or the return to painting, and so on. But what does this all amount to? Art wants to pass, it wants to finally die—it is not mere eccentricity that great artists once believed they were making the last artwork. If art finally died, this would signal that the "untransfigured suffering of man"[8] over the ages would finally be transfigured into something else. Simply pronouncing art dead, or irrelevant to the everyday is not enough to warrant its demise, as if it were so simple to eradicate the suffering of man. The culture industry—with its ceaseless thrusting of art in our faces—is the penance for failing to achieve socialism, but also the petrified reminder of its possibility. In this sense, art and culture are not the solution to, but rather the problem of, our own suffering, and the crystallization of this problem also implies redemption. Does it not seem that, contrary to this, we want to *preserve* art, to restore the world through art, and wasn't this specifically a crucial element of fascism, or less dramatically, conservatism? In an era of where there are no historical tasks or clearly defined problems, any proposed solution is a false reconciliation. In Adorno's words, "that the world which, as Baudelaire wrote, has lost its fragrance and then since its color, could have them restored by art strikes only the artless as possible."[9]

We might today treat Trotsky with the critical method which he treated bourgeois art, except that this task seems impossible. The salience of Trotsky's critique today—that we can so easily view the same problems as he did in apparently "new" art—is not the solution, but the problem. The continual indigestion of culture is a problem that needs to be problematized—no simple solutions can present themselves today without also seeing history as a problem. In other words, without historical consciousness that articulates the social situation of art, we are all relegated to philistinism, nostalgic for a moment where all possibilities didn't seem foreclosed, or predetermined the way they do today. Perhaps now more than ever, art works yearn to be recognized as distinct from the political or social ideas that underlie them—that is, we should not condemn the nostalgia of new age experimental music for example, or the vulgar politics of social art, but formulate them as incomprehensible aesthetic problems that constantly reintroduce social redemption without exactly fulfilling it.

Contemporary art's biggest and perhaps only problem is that it doesn't formulate itself as a problem, but instead endeavors to devise quick-fix solutions. This is evident in everything from Fried and Greenberg's criticism of "literal" art, to relational aesthetics, to the social turn that endeavors to make 'concrete' interventions in the world, as if even the most rhetorical things are without effect. Ultimately this implies a distance so alienated that there seems no connection to the world we live in whatsoever. This is counterposed to a would-be "revolutionary art," insofar as Trotsky (as quoted above) saw it as impossible for any form of art, no matter how depoliticized, to be somehow illuminative of a seemingly inevitable political becoming. Trotsky understood the forms of both peasant literature and futurism as illuminated by a concept of history that was no longer intact, but fragmentary. Trotsky thought the idea that a work of art could ever be *without* a political or social tendency—or that some were more "social" than others—was absurd. It is no longer self-evident, as it once was, that *all* objects, art or otherwise, are shaped by social conditions in such a way that they imply society's (as we understand it) exhaustion and deserve critical attention. Bourgeois art was withering away and seemed to be yielding to something else.

But without a concept of history—that is, the construction of historical problems—viewers are reduced to philistines, and artists are reduced to dilettantes, grappling for whatever is available, and this is not limited to art, but includes every other cultural object in the world. In this light it is easy to frame the return to the avant-garde art styles—e.g. geometric abstraction, Ab-Ex, or Dada—as something almost wholly inartistic, and reducible to other kitschy objects utilized for the decoration of one's apparent individuality. It is *possibility* that is longed for in ever more quixotic ways, and "avant-garde" *style* is the compromise when it can't be grasped as a historical problem. This, of course, is kitsch.

In the contemporary state of affairs, where life is a series of arbitrary events without meaning or problematic substance, "fellow travelers" are perhaps reduced to particles in the arbitrariness of natural law. One cannot simply propose that "contemporary art is about this" notion, or is "embodied by that" reality, nor can one find revolutionary qualities in a certain style over another, as we are left without models or a concept of history to shape experience. For example, on the one hand, "art" and "politics" do not only fail to travel side by side, urging each other forward, but we cannot even find an apt metaphor for such traveling in Cormac Mccarthy's *The Road*, whose characters aimlessly wander the scorched earth, carrying some vague human torch for future generations that may not exist, going "further along a dreary road," occasionally bumping paths and sharing what precious scraps of humanity remain, as if it ever did. Rather, both contemporary "art" and "politics" might each be akin to the nameless, free-floating subject in Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnameable*, who resembles a lawn ornament more than a human with anything that might be called agency: it is able to freely reminisce about past events that may, or may not have happened—no one really knows for certain—but is ultimately static, congealed into an object, ashen with the soot of forgetfulness and plagued by its never-has-been-ness, trying to reminisce, "but images of this kind the will cannot revive without doing them violence."[10] At two recent panel discussions hosted by the Platypus Affiliated Society on the theme of art and activism, many panelists unanimously agreed that the propagandistic poster is a paradigm of art. With this idea they browbeat the audience into believing that this is the highest achievement of artistic form. Whether or not one agrees or disagrees with them is hardly the point. The problem is the regulation of aesthetic forms, naturalized without the criticism that Trotsky perceived as constitutive of the new world.

Trotsky—like Benjamin, Adorno, and Greenberg—never foreclosed the endlessly open possibilities of any aesthetic form. As Adorno would later argue in "Commitment," there are no rules, no formulae for artistic experimentation; certain artworks may be "exemplary, but not a model."[17] Although Trotsky had deep and well-justified political qualms with the peasantry as much as with Futurism, he was constantly open, and even endeavored to further open the possible directions that their art might take. He criticized at length, taking the work more seriously than the artists often took their own work, and he ends many sections of *LR* with, "we must wish them luck" even when he disagreed. Trotsky thought, and hoped, that art would "plough the field in all directions." We have to wonder what the prospects for this are like today. In some ways, there is no "ploughing in all directions," but rather ploughing in a provincial expanse that rarely leaves the circumference of one's own arm-length, *constrained* instead of *liberated* by a politics filled with "reality principles," and "lived-world" abstractions that Adorno once criticized. Indeed, it is specifically "directionality" that is lacking, and so, helplessly, art contemplatively turns its critical shafts inwards—the confusion of autonomous art for a depoliticized "art for art's sake" illustrates this. Ultimately, in the meandering reminiscences of one's own inner fantasia, one must occasionally pass into the recognition of this contemplation—the question is whether or not this recognition can then be constructed, or if the possibility of life will pass us by. On the other hand, it may be the case that contemporary art production works overzealously, ploughing aimlessly, taking the new and autonomous

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October 1921: Lenin looks back

Lars T. Lih

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 Le Blanc of the International Socialist Organization, and Lars T. Lih, the author of Lenin Rediscovered: "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?" Lih retranslated "*Fourth Anniversary of the October Revolution,*" a* Pravda *article by Lenin published October 18, 1921, and presented his commentary as a way of addressing the prompt. A condensed translation, prefaced by Lih's commentary, follows. In Russian, the text can be found in Lenin,* Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, 5th ed., 44:144-52. The full text in English can be found at http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/oct/14.htm.*

LATE 1921 MARKED THE BEGINNING of the health troubles that eventually put an end to Lenin's political career.Lenin was now forced to abstain from direct governmental activity for long periods, returning only for a month or two in the spring and once more in the fall of 1922. The term "last writings" is usually applied to Lenin's writings in late 1922 and early 1923, but this article from October 1921 can usefully be viewed as the first of the last writings: the first attempt by Lenin to assess what the revolution had accomplished and what still needed to be done.

In early 1921, the Soviet government had introduced the New Economic Policy, or NEP, a set of policies that officially accepted the continued existence of various capitalist institutions in Soviet Russia for the foreseeable future. Naturally these policy changes had an impact on Lenin's later assessment of the socialist accomplishments of the revolutionary period. Nevertheless, Lenin's deep sense of disappointment about this issue can be traced back at least to 1919 and therefore it should not be tied too closely to the changes that accompanied NEP.

The most striking feature of Lenin's retrospective look at the October revolution after four years of hard-fought civil war is the contrast in his tone when talking about the "bourgeois-democratic" accomplishments of the Russian revolution in comparison to its accomplishments when viewed as a socialist revolution. Lenin is chipper, proud, and even boastful about the radical democratic aims of the October revolution. He stresses in particular the achievements of basic equality: peasants are regarded as full citizens, women have full legal equality, national oppression is ended, religion is no longer accorded state privileges. In all of these areas, Soviet Russia has accomplished the program of earlier "bourgeois" revolutions in a more conclusive fashion than the bourgeois revolutions themselves were able to do. In accordance with prewar "Old Bolshevism," Lenin argues that only a proletarian revolution could have accomplished "bourgeois-democratic" aims in so sweeping a fashion. One major plank of Old Bolshevism, however, is conspicuously absent from Lenin's litany: political freedom, as manifest in such things as freedom of the press, assembly, association, and the like.

In contrast, Lenin's attitude toward the socialist program of the October Revolution is one of grim determination. The determination is real, but so is the grimness. Lenin is defensive and even worried about the revolution's socialist tasks, and he admits freely that real socialist accomplishments lie mostly in the future. He shows most confidence about those "socialist" accomplishments that most resemble "democratic" ones, like the soviet system as a type of democracy, and pulling out of the world war. Economic transformation, which Lenin identifies as "our most important and most difficult task," is also "the one we have come least close to accomplishing." Lenin plainly has no convincing answer in his own mind to socialist critics such as Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg, who argued that Bolshevik agrarian reforms had created obstacles to future socialist transformation. The strong emphasis in the section on socialist revolution is on failures, mistakes, and the long and uncertain road ahead.

Lenin is vague about exactly when, in his view, the Bolsheviks had miscalculated the chances for socialist transformation, as described in the last paragraph of Lenin's article, below. His critique, however, makes best sense when applied to his own 1917 vision of "steps toward socialism," as set forth in *The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It* and other works.

Aside from its own merits, I have chosen to retranslate this article because the Soviet-era English translation is seriously misleading in certain matters of content and tone. In contrast to that translation, I have brought out Lenin's repeated use of the phrase "to the end" (*do kontsa*), since "carrying the democratic revolution *to the end*" was a defining goal of pre-revolutionary Old Bolshevism. In April 1917, the Old Bolsheviks who challenged Lenin claimed that Russia's democratic revolution had not *yet* been carried out "to the end." In response, Lenin argued that the goal of carrying the democratic revolution to the end no longer made sense. He seems to have changed his mind on this point. For more on the debates of April 1917, see my article "The Ironic Triumph of Old Bolshevism" in *Russian History*, 38 (2011), 199-242. Further context useful for the interpretation of Lenin's 1921 article can be found in my recently published book *Lenin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

Fourth Anniversary of the October Revolution

N. Lenin, October 1921

The fourth anniversary of October 25 (November 7) is approaching. The farther that great day recedes from us, the more clearly we see the significance of proletarian revolution in Russia, and the more deeply we reflect upon the practical experience of our work, seen as a whole.

Bourgeois-Democratic Revolution in Russia

The immediate and most urgent task of the revolution in Russia was a bourgeois-democratic task, namely, to destroy the survivals of medievalism and sweep them away to the end [*do kontsa*], to purify Russia of this barbarism, of this shame, and to remove this immense hindrance to any kind of culture and to any kind of progress in our country. And we can justifiably take pride in having carried out this purification much more decisively, rapidly, boldly and successfully, and—from the point of view of its effect on the very depths of the mass of the *narod*—much more widely and deeply, than the great French Revolution over one hundred and twenty-five years ago.

The bourgeois-democratic content of the revolution means that the social relations (systems, institutions) of the country are purified of medievalism, of hangovers from serfdom, of feudalism. What were the chief manifestations, survivals, remnants of serfdom in Russia up to 1917? The monarchy, the system of social estates [i.e., legally recognized differences in citizenship rights], landed proprietorship and land tenure, the status of women, religion, the oppression of nationalities. Take any one of these Augean stables, which, incidentally, none of the more advanced states really fully cleansed when they accomplished *their* bourgeois-democratic revolutions one hundred and twenty-five, two hundred and fifty and more years ago (1649 in England); take any of these Augean stables, and you will see that we have utterly cleansed them.

Take religion, or women's lack of rights, or the oppression and inequality of the non-Russian nationalities. These are all problems of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. We have fought and are fighting religion in earnest. We have granted *all* the non-Russian nationalities *their own* republics or autonomous regions. We in Russia no longer have anything so base, mean and repellent as the lack or the inequality of rights for women, that disgusting survival of serf society and medievalism, which is being refurbished by the avaricious bourgeoisie and the dull-witted and frightened petty bourgeoisie in every other country in the world without exception.

Agrarian Reform

We left not a stone, not a brick of that ancient edifice, the social-estate system (even the most advanced countries, such as Britain, France and Germany, have not completely rid themselves of traces of this system to this day!). We tore out the deep-seated roots of the social-estate system, namely, the remnants of feudalism and serfdom in the system of landownership, to the end [*do kontsa*]. "One may argue" (there are plenty of *littérateurs* abroad—Cadets, Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries—who can indulge in such arguments) as to what will result from the transformation of land relations carried out by the Great October Revolution "in the long run." We have no desire right now to waste time on such disputes, for we are deciding this dispute, as well as a mass of connected disputes, by struggle. But the fact cannot be denied that the petty-bourgeois democrats "made a pact" [*soglashalis*] with the landowners, the custodians of the traditions of serfdom, for eight months, while in a few weeks we swept the landowners and all their traditions from Russian soil to the end [*do kontsa*].

All this goes to make up the content of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. One hundred and fifty or two hundred and fifty years ago, the progressive leaders of that revolution (or of those revolutions, if we consider each national variety of the one general type) promised to rid mankind of medieval privileges, of the inequality of women, of state privileges for one religion or another (or for the *idea* of religion in general), and of unequal rights for nationalities. They made promises, but they did not fulfill them. They could not fulfill them, for they were hindered by their "respect" for the "sacred right of private property." In our proletarian revolution there was none of this accursed "respect" for this thrice-accursed medievalism and for the "sacred right of private property."

Socialist Revolution in Russia

The correctness of our understanding of Marxism on this point—our estimate of the experience of former revolutions—has been completely confirmed during the last four years. We have carried the bourgeois-democratic revolution *to the end* [*do kontsa*] as nobody has done before. Completely purposively, firmly and unswervingly we are moving *forward*, toward the socialist revolution, knowing that it is not separated from the bourgeois-democratic revolution by a Chinese wall, and knowing too that (in the last analysis) *struggle alone* will determine how far we shall move forward, what part of this unimaginably lofty task we shall accomplish, and what part of our victories we shall consolidate. Time will show. But even now we see that a tremendous amount—tremendous for this ruined, exhausted and backward country—has been done in the matter of the socialist transformation of society.

Soviets

The soviet system is one of the most vivid confirmations, or manifestations, of this growing-over [*pererastanie*] of one revolution into another. The soviet system provides the maximum of democracy for the workers and peasants. At the same time, it marks a break with the *bourgeois* form of democracy and the rise of a *new*, epoch-making *type* of democracy, namely, the proletarian form of democracy, that is, the dictatorship of the proletariat.

We do not forget for a moment that there really have been a lot of failures and mistakes and there continue to be many. How can failures and mistakes be avoided in a matter so new in world history as the creation of an unprecedented *type* of state system? But we have a right to be proud and we are proud that to us has fallen the good fortune to *begin* the building of a soviet state, to *begin* a new era in world history, the era of the rule of a *new* class.

Imperialist War

Ever more clearly, more distinctly, more inevitably does the grim truth arise before the millions and millions who are pondering the causes of the recent war and of the approaching future war. It is impossible to escape imperialist war, and the imperialist peace which inevitably engenders imperialist war. It is impossible to escape that hell, *except by Bolshevik struggle and Bolshevik revolution*.

This first victory is *not yet the final victory*, and it was achieved by our October Revolution at the price of incredible difficulties and hardships, at the price of unprecedented suffering, accompanied by a series of serious failures and mistakes on our part. Without failures and mistakes, how could a single backward *narod* be expected to achieve victory over the imperialist wars of the most powerful and most developed countries of the world! We have begun this job. It is not important which proletarians of which nation will carry this business to the end [*do kontsa*], nor when (at what date and time) they do it. The essential thing is that the ice has been broken, the road is open, the way has been shown.

Transformation of the Economy

Lastly, our most important and most difficult task, the one we have come least close to accomplishing: economic construction, the laying of economic foundations for the new, socialist edifice on the site of the demolished feudal edifice and the semi-demolished capitalist edifice. In this most important and most difficult business, we have sustained more failures than anywhere else, more mistakes than anywhere else. How could anyone expect that a task so new to the world could be begun without failures and without mistakes! But we have begun it. We shall continue it.

Borne along on the crest of the wave of enthusiasm, rousing first the political and then the military enthusiasm of the *narod*, we thought we could rely directly on this enthusiasm to accomplish economic tasks that were just as grand as our military and general political ones. We calculated—or perhaps it would be truer to say that we presumed without adequate calculation—on using the commands of the proletarian state to arrange state production and state distribution of products in communist style in a country of small peasant farms. Life has revealed our mistake. |**P**

Translated by Lars T. Lih

Trotsky's theory, continued from page 3

freedom of art as natural law. It may be that political ideology and social criticism cannot penetrate art as the constrained suffering of the failure of humans to move forward, consequently becoming more mute. |**P**

1. J.M. Bernstein, Lydia Goehr, Gregg Horowitz, and Chris Cutrone, "The Relevance of Critical Theory to Art Today," *Platypus Review* #31 (January 2011), available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2011/01/01/the-relevance-of-critical-theory-to-art-today/>.
2. Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Shocken Books, 1968), 155.
3. Leon Trotsky, "Art and politics in our epoch," *Partisan Review* 1938. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/06/artpol.htm>.
4. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005 [1924]), 70–71. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/index.htm>.
5. Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1920]), 72.
6. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 133.
7. Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Continuum, 2004 [1958]), 41–42.
8. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum 2004), 50.
9. Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 109.
10. Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," in *Selected Writings*, Howard W. Jennings et al., vol. 2, 1927-1930, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 237.

Trotsky's Marxism, continued from page 1

modern city-states. All these impulses and discontents Marx sought to ground in his theory of *Capital*, tearing asunder all the crude parodies of the past. The leaders of October had no such illusions; the paradigm, it seems, had changed. They struggled over the "incomplete present," appraising the meaning of their actions on a world-historical scale. It is no small wonder that modern social thought emerged contemporaneously in figures like Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. Trotsky (and the Bolsheviks) simply stand out as a profound expression of this historical shift, with an acute understanding of the "October" experience.

Trotsky is even clearer on this score in an appendix to his *The History of Russian Revolution*. In a revealing passage, he writes,

> The task of the historian [in the period of "Thermidorian Reaction"] becomes one of ideological restoration. He must dig out the genuine views and aims of the revolutionary party from under subsequent political accumulations. Despite the briefness of the periods succeeding each other, this task is much like the deciphering of a palimpsest, for the constructions of the epigone school are by no means always superior to those theological ingenuities for whose sake the monks of the seventh and eight centuries destroyed the parchment and papyrus of the classics.[4]

This is no hyperbole. One only needs to take a quick glance at contemporary "Marxism" to get a sense of how terribly cryptic this material has become.

What was the "ideological restoration" needed? The reader cannot help but be struck by seemingly anticlimactic conclusion of the *History,* where Trotsky speculates:

> The historic ascent of humanity, taken as a whole, may be summarized as a succession of victories of consciousness over blind forces—in nature, in society, in man himself. Critical and creative thought can boast of its greatest victories up to now in the struggle with nature. The physico-chemical sciences have already reached a point where man is clearly about to become master of matter. *But social relations are still forming in the manner of the coral islands.* Parliamentarism illuminated only the surface of society, and even that with a rather artificial light. In comparison with monarchy and other heirlooms from the cannibals and cave-dwellers, democracy is of course a great conquest, but it leaves the blind play of forces in the social relations of men untouched. It was against this *deeper sphere of the unconscious* that the October revolution was the first to raise its hand. The Soviet system wishes to bring aim and plan into the very basis of society, where up to now only accumulated consequences have reigned.[5]

If we are to believe that history is more then a set of contingent factors, more then an oversized pinball machine shooting us around every which way, or a form of "divine providence" as the pre-moderns believed, we must approach the present as historical, such that "the tradition of all dead generations" really does weigh "like a nightmare on the brains of the living." This was the project Trotsky had set for himself, and it is the essence of his Marxism.

As far back as 1906, Trotsky had written in his pamphlet, *Results and Prospects*, "History does not repeat itself. However much one may compare the Russian Revolution [of 1905] with the Great French Revolution, the former can never be transformed into a repetition of the latter. The 19th century has not passed in vain."[6] If only one could be so optimistic today! We face the uncertain phenomenon of 1989 effacing not only "October" but 1789 as well. It may no longer be the case that, as Trotsky once claimed, "The whole of modern France, in many respects the whole of modern civilization, arose out of the bath of the French Revolution!"[7] |**P**

1. Leon Trotsky, "Stalinism and Bolshevism" (28 August, 1937). Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/08/stalinism.htm>.
2. Leon Trotsky, *The Lessons of October*, trans. John G. Wright (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1937 [1924]). Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lessons/index.htm>.
3. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Saul K. Padover. Originally published in 1852. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>.
4. Leon Trotsky, "Appendix No. 2: Socialism in a Separate Country?," in *The History of the Russian Revolution*, vol. 3, *The Triumph of the Soviets*, trans. Max Eastman. Originally published in 1930. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch50.htm>.
5. Leon Trotsky, "Conclusion," in *The History of the Russian Revolution*, vol. 3. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch48.htm>.
6. Leon Trotsky, *Results and Prospects*. Originally published in 1906. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp-index.htm>.
7. Leon Trotsky, "In Defense of October" (speech delivered in Copenhagen, Denmark in November, 1932). Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/11/oct.htm>.

Subject, class, and the Hegelian legacy in critical social theory

Timothy Hall

At the 2011 Left Forum, held at Pace University in NYC between March 18-21, Platypus hosted a conversation on "Lukács's Marxism." Panelists Timothy Bewes (Brown University), Jeremy Cohan (Platypus), Timothy Hall (University of East London, U.K.), and Marco Torres (Platypus) were asked to address, "Who was Lukács? Critic of reification, founder of Hegelian Marxism, Critical Theory, Western Marxism? Or: philosopher of Bolshevism, apologist for Leninism, romantic socialist, voluntarist idealist, terrorist revolutionary? Lukács is usually read as an interpreter rather than a dedicated follower of Marxism, leaving Lukács's particular contribution obscure. Lukács was most original—and influential—when he accepted the presuppositions of Marxism, the political practice and theory of revolution, in earnest, from 1919-25, in History and Class Consciousness *and associated works—however Lukács himself may have disavowed them subsequently. What can we make of Lukács's legacy today, his investigation and elaboration of the problematic of Marxism, and what are the essential issues potentially raised for our time?" The article that follows is a modified version of Timothy Hall's opening remarks.*

1. Is there a revolutionary subject today? Is there, in other words a subject capable of challenging the status quo; of challenging society as a whole characterized by universal commodity relations? If so, who is this subject and how does it stand towards the class subject of classical Marxist theory?

For a variety of reasons, both intellectual and political, such questions have begun to be asked with increasing regularity today. Not the least of these is the seismic events in the Arab states beginning with the revolution in Tunisia last January and followed by the revolution in Egypt. These events have reignited debates about the possibility of revolutionary action and called into question the assumption that we are not living through revolutionary times. Prior to this, however, the resurgence of interest, since the mid-nineties, in modernity and modernism in the humanities and social sciences (and a corresponding waning of interest in post-modernist discourses) has created a more conducive intellectual environment for posing these questions.

There is a growing consensus on the Left that it is not enough to theorize "subjection/subjectivization" in ever greater detail while neglecting to theorize political practice or action. The notion that an individual politics of style could substitute for a substantive discussion of political practice, as was once advanced, is no longer compelling. My focus will be on the tradition I am most familiar with: the tradition deriving from Hegelian Marxism and the critical social theory developed by the Frankfurt School. What emerges from a consideration of this tradition are a range of debates on the character of the political subject; on the relations between idealism and materialism; and on the role of class in politics with a broader significance.

A number of responses to the question of the existence and identity of the subject can be discerned in this tradition. Each could be considered to be a response to the theory of proletarian praxis developed by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). In this work Lukács affirms the existence of such a subject and identifies it as the proletariat. The particular status of the proletariat in the capitalist productive process enables it to solve the riddle of the commodity and recreate the social world in its own (free) image. Defences of this view can be found in Horkheimer's work from the 1930s, in Castoriadis at various points in his career, and in the Hegel-fortified Marx outlined by Gillian Rose in *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1982).

The first response originating in the middle and late period of the Frankfurt School is that there is no such subject today; that historically there was such a subject— the proletariat—but that, for a variety of reasons, it has vanished from the political scene. According to this view, all that remains is the possibility of radical insights into the social whole but without the corresponding possibility of radical social transformation. This roughly approximates Adorno's position, specifically the critical status he accords artworks in modernity. It also includes those attempts to recover an ethics from Adorno's aesthetic theory such as that developed by Jay Bernstein in *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (2001).

Another view is that the whole problem of the subject was misconstrued by the Marxist tradition. For this tradition the idea that capitalist society is antagonistic because of class conflict is fundamentally wrong-headed. This gives rise to the erroneous idea that the subject of modernity is the proletariat. This view has been defended by Moishe Postone in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (1993) but is also taken up by Marxists that follow Postone's lead in according centrality to the value-form in critical social theory.

While both the first and the second position concur in holding that there is no political subject today, they do so for contrasting reasons. For the second the very notion of a subject of history is mistaken. Insofar as we can speak of a subject in this sense, it is capital itself. Such a "subject," however, is anything but revolutionary and hardly qualifies as a subject at all on account of the fact that it is destined to remain unconscious and "blind."[1] For the first, by contrast, the disappearance of the macrological subject is historical. It marks the transition between liberal and late capitalism. This is to say: at a certain point such a subject was the bearer or revolutionary overcoming but is no longer.

Which view is correct? Has the political subject become historically obsolete or was it a fateful misconception on the part of the Marxian tradition? In my view the former is closer to the truth. I will try to show this by way of a critique of the latter view specifically as this is articulated in Postone's seminal work from 1993. What I'm going to suggest is that:

i. The charge of 'productivism' levelled at the Hegelian Marxist tradition—that the category of labor is treated as a transhistorical category and that as a consequence such theories cannot account for their own self-possibility—is not borne out.

ii. While Postone shares the desire for an immanent theory with Hegelian Marxism, he is prevented from realizing this because he dispenses with the categories of subjectivity, class, and totality.

2. Postone's critique of Hegelian Marxism, is largely carried out in Part I of *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. The basic thrust of his reading of Marx's theory of capitalism is to see it "less as a theory of forms of exploitation and domination within modern society, and more as a critical social theory of the nature of modernity itself"(4). However, before Marxism can aspire to become a critical theory, able to account for its own theoretical self-possibility, it has first to expunge its dogmatic assumptions. Principal amongst these is the idea that labor represents a transhistorical constitutive power lying at the base of all social formations. While, for Postone, the early Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology* subscribed to this view, the late Marx of *Capital* (1867) comes to reject it. For the late Marx, "the notion that labor constitutes the social world and is the source of all wealth does not refer to society in general but to capitalist, or modern society alone"(4). Whereas for the early Marx emancipation from capitalism involves the realization of the essential, laboring subject (species-being), for the late Marx it takes the form of an emancipation from the self-generating and self-valorizing system that is capitalism.

Hegelian Marxism is closer to the young Marx's view. In *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács attempts a materialist appropriation of Hegel's concept of *Geist*. According to Postone, Lukács rejected Hegel's concept of *Geist* as mystified, but held on to its identical form: the self-moving substance that is subject becomes the proletariat as identical subject-object of history. For Postone the problem with this approach is that it repeats the error of the young Marx in essentializing the productive subject. Rather than view this as a historically mediated reality particular to capitalist society, it becomes instead the constitutive source of all history. In this, Lukács doesn't simply repeat the error of the young Marx but compounds it by giving credence to the idea that history has a subject.

For this reason Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* throws a long shadow over the development of Marxist thought in the 20th Century in Postone's view. Not only is it responsible for the fiction of a meta-historical subject but also for the notion that totality represents a normative value for critical theory. In this regard the self-totalizing character of proletarian practice fatefully mimics the self-totalizing, auto-generating logic of capital itself. Consequently instead of casting resistance to social domination in terms antithetical to this—i.e. as interrupting forestalling or arresting the logic of totality—it unwittingly exacerbates it. As Postone writes, "an institutionally totalizing form of politics should be interpreted as an expression of the political coordination of capital as the totality, subject to its constraints and imperatives rather than the overcoming of capital. The abolition of totality would, then, allow for the possible constitution of very different, non-totalizing, forms of the political coordination and regulation of society"(79-80).

What form would such a politics take and what would its relation be to class? Postone begins to develop this in Part III of *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. In Postone's view, the schema that has dominated Marxism (including Hegelian Marxism) is the forces of production/relations of production schema. Yet the development of the former does not lead in the direction that Marxists have traditionally thought:

> As industrial production becomes fully developed [the] productive powers of the social whole become greater than the combined skills, labor and experience of the collective worker. They are socially general, the accumulated knowledge and power of humanity constituting itself as such in alienated form; they cannot adequately be apprehended as the objectified powers of the proletariat. "Dead labor," to use Marx's term, is no longer the objectification of "living labor" alone; it has become the objectification of historical time. (356)

The suggestion here is that productive forces develop to a point beyond where it is possible to view the instituted world as the objectified power of the proletariat. Yet there is no missed moment here, for Postone, where a class politics was potentially adequate to the world but is no longer. Rather this development was intrinsic to the logic of capital. This implies that both the proletariat and capitalist class are bound to capital and that emancipation takes the form of the abolition of the proletariat and the labor it performs (357). There is then no reconfiguration of class politics in Postone's view. There is no sense in which a set of class-related oppositional strategies might be thought as challenging the status quo. Rather, the overcoming of capital should be conceived as the "people's reappropriation of socially general capacities that are not ultimately grounded in the working class"(357).

3. To summarize Postone's critique of Hegelian Marxism: the latter is "productivist" in holding that labor constitutes the social world and is the origin of all wealth. This is only the case in capitalist societies, not societies in general. From this rises the notion of the subject of history in Hegelian Marxism, that is, of a subject capable of recovering its agency from its alienated form and re-instituting society in its own image. But, for Postone, such an assessment plays into the hands of the totalizing logic of capital instead of opposing it. In contrast to the class subject of classical Marxism he proposes the anti-totalizing practice of the people.

Leaving to one side for the moment the alternative vision of political subjectivity that Postone proposes I will focus on the charge of productivism and dogmatism in Hegelian Marxism. The charge of "productivism" fails, in my view, to take account of the difference between the "total social process" and the reproduction of capitalist relations of production in the Hegelian Marxist tradition. In the former, social practices serve to reproduce existing social relations. Yet there is nothing inherently reductive about this position. Cultural, political, and legal practices, no less than economic practices, serve to reproduce the status quo and do so primarily, not in a secondary and derivative way. For this reason the approach could be characterized as "productivist" but social practices in general do the producing, not simply human labor.

Moreover, one could draw a line around these practices and describe them as bourgeois or class-related. This would be fine as long as class is not defined in a reductive way in relation to ownership of the means of production. Class for Lukács, for example, relates to an array of practices serving to produce and reproduce existing social relations, only some of which are economic. Thus for Lukács cultural practices like journalism or science serve to reproduce social relations irrespective of the specific intentions of any particular practitioner. They do this through their form not by conferring a specious universality on capitalist relations of production. What is reified, writes Lukács in relation to journalism, is subjectivity itself:

> [it is] knowledge, temperament and powers of expression that are reduced to an abstract mechanism functioning autonomously and divorced both from the personality of their owner and from the material and concrete nature of the subject matter in hand.[2]

Journalism as a practice is restricted in respect of its critical insight by the fact that as a reification of subjectivity it reproduces existing relations of production. Public opinion forms an objective system—"an abstract mechanism functioning autonomously." This system allows for a range of 'different' opinions—a Melanie Philips, a Toby Young, a Laurie Penny, and a Polly Toynbee. But since the very practice is predicated on a far-reaching reification, it is powerless to interrupt reified social reality.

Should we decide that there no is 'honor' to be had in journalism and turn our hand instead to the professions of law, public administration or even an academic career we would soon discover that there is no honor to be had here either. For Lukács, if we look at the practice of science we discover that

> the more intricate a modern science becomes and the better it understands itself methodologically, the more resolutely it will turn its back on the ontological problems of its own sphere of influence and eliminate them from the realm where it has achieved some insight.[3]

The fact that science is implicated in specialization and social fragmentation means that it is unable to interrupt this reality. Science as cultural activity (and philosophy as second-order reflection on this) produces and reproduces the status quo by exploring and deepening the nomological structure of the social world.

To summarize: for Lukács and the Frankfurt School it is not labor that produces and reproduces existing relations but social practices in general, that is, our economic, legal, political and cultural practices broadly understood. Whilst these do serve to produce and reproduce the status quo, notwithstanding the conscious intentions of those participating in them, to suggest as Postone does, that this ontologizes labor as the essential human activity is simply not correct. Neither is the Hegelian Marxist approach debarred from accounting for its self-possibility. Working practices like a host of other social practices are historically specific and have no application outside the social world they serve to reproduce.

4. However, Postone isn't simply wrong about the Hegelian Marxist tradition. His own conception of critical social theory is seriously skewed as a consequence. For in his rush to dispense with what he regards as discredited categories of subjectivity, class, and totality he ends up undermining any basis for interrupting the cycle of social relations.

Everything turns for Postone on a fateful misreading of Hegel that Marx himself would only address in his later writings; that is, on the interpretation and demystification of the Hegelian subject. For Hegel, the subject is transpersonal. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* he demonstrates how even the most subjective awareness of the world presupposes a "shape of spirit" or concrete socio-historical world. Central to this demonstration was the concept of intersubjective recognition that makes its appearance in Chapter IV, the famous master/slave dialectic. Hegel's strategy is to show how conceptions of the subject (e.g. the individual as the bearer of abstract rights or the moral subject acting in accordance with the dictates of conscience) are not immediate subjective positions but the results or outcomes of historical struggles for recognition. According to Postone, Marx initially appropriated this model of subjectivity but gave it a materialist twist by replacing spirit with labor. For the early Marx it was the productivity of labor—not spirit—that one needed to turn to make sense of forms and institutions of the bourgeois world that appeared immediate and natural.

For Postone, Marx changes his mind about Hegel as he comes to prepare for the writing of *Capital*. Instead of looking to Hegel, to provide a theory of subjectivity albeit in inverted, form he sees his work, particularly the *Science of Logic,* as a prescient attempt to work through the logic of capital. Famously, Hegel claims to have transcended the subjective standpoint in the *Science of Logic* and there is no reference to subjective experience in the work. However, this sea change in Marx's relation to Hegel went unnoticed for the most part by the Marxian tradition, particularly by Lukács who sought to supplement the critique of capital with a theory of revolutionary subjectivity, the resources for which were to be found in Marx's early writings.

The ramifications of this were profound. To begin with, the entire project of supplementing Marx's critique of capital with a theory of subjectivity was misguided. It set Marxism on the pathway of identifying a meta-historical subject; it misconstrued the nature of social domination in capitalist societies (not the domination of one class over another but fundamentally impersonal); it wrongly defined the task of critical social theory as the attempt to distinguish itself from idealism. What Hegel anticipated—and Marx saw—was the distinctive ontology of capitalism, its existence as a "real abstraction." The obsession evidenced in Hegelian Marxism, in distinguishing between an idealist and an authentically materialist approach missed the point: the real world had become an abstraction. For Postone, Hegel's insight lay in grasping this. The unstinting attempt to expunge the idealism from Hegel's dialectic inevitably lost sight of this. For by insisting that capitalist domination was at bottom class domination, the fundamental character of the former was misrecognized.

5. These are complicated claims that require a book-length study to disentangle. The following remarks should suffice to show that Postone's reading of the Hegelian legacy in Marx is at the very least problematic.

To begin with, if, as I have suggested, Postone's interpretation of Hegelian Marxism is inadequate what are the implications of this for the position that he seeks to defend? Lukács in fact shares Postone's aim of developing a critical—.e. wholly immanent—social theory. He also shares Postone's concern to develop a non-reductive Marxism. The seeming advantage of Lukács's approach, however, is that he does not have to throw the concepts of mediation, class, and totality overboard to do this.

To take the example of class: Lukács and the subsequent theorists of the Frankfurt School would surely have agreed with Postone's insistence on the impersonal form of modern social domination. It is doubtful, however, that they would have agreed that experience of class domination rests on a productivist fallacy. Surely the point of the approach Lukács innovated was that class-based forms of domination were always mediated by the illusion of the commodity form. It isn't that class domination does not exist. Nor is it the case that class politics does not exist. The point is that a class-based politics comes up short: that in failing to interrupt the total social process it fails also to throw off the yoke of class domination. In fairness to Postone, he would not deny the existence of class domination/politics. However, he is always struggling to account for this having asserted that the proletariat are as much a part of the logic of capital as the capitalist class is.

There is another possibility here however: we might agree that the Hegelian Marxist approach is not reductive and yet still insist on its adherence to productivist models. We could, for example, accept that social practices (not human labor) reproduce the status quo and still insist that Lukács and others set too much store in the capacity of the subject to overcome its alienated objective form. Adorno's insistence, against Lukács, in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) that there was a part of the object that wasn't reducible to subject seems representative of this view.[4] Adorno's strategy, here and elsewhere, appears not to involve the wholesale junking of Hegelian Marxist categories. On the contrary, he appears rather to insist on a change of emphasis away from the subject and the category of mediation and towards the object and the "category" of immediacy. Thus concepts like mediation and totality are still deployed in negative dialectics but in the service of the immediate – of what will not allow (without falsification) of discursive elaboration.[5]

However, the same approach is not adopted by Postone in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. His own conception of the subject (the people) is abstractly opposed to the self-generating and self-valorizing totality in an undialectical fashion. At best this looks like a re-inscription of the Lukács's problematic of the subject as Neil Larsen has recently argued.[6] At worst, "the people" appears to respond to ethical imperatives every bit as unmediated as the postmodern counterparts that Postone is looking to distance himself from.

Finally, we should surely be wary of any attempt to relate Marxist-inspired critical theory to a work as odd as Hegel's *Science of Logic*. If we hesitate with many "left Hegelians" in moving to the realm of "science" in which the "merely" subjective standpoint is overcome, what are the implications of this for the concept of capital that Postone is attempting to defend? Postone would insist here that we need to radically review our understanding of Hegel's project. Rather than attempting to rewrite Kant's transcendental deduction, we should instead think of Hegel as engaging, in an approximate way, with the impersonal form of modern social domination. For me, however, it is unclear how Postone's position in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* is significantly different from a range of neo-structuralist positions in which subjectivity is seen as dispersed across power structures in society. Rather than read the Hegelian legacy in this way I would favour a return to Gillian Rose's proposal to question the fundamental difference between the productivity of spirit and the productivity of labor.[7] More precisely, to question the fundamental importance that Marxists have traditionally given to this distinction. For if social institutions are viewed as the result of socio-historical work, rather than human labor, the charge of "productivism" begins to look less urgent.

6. To return briefly to the question with which I started: what are the possibilities for a class politics today? In my view there certainly is class politics today but without revolutionary potential. Whilst this cannot be discounted, it is important not to underestimate the extent to which any such movement is already deformed, from the inside and the outside, by the universality of the commodity. |**P**

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1. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1993), 77. Hereafter cited parenthetically with the appropriate page number(s).
2. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* trans. R. Livingstone (London: Merlin, 1971[1923]), 100.
3. Ibid., 104
4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973),192.
5. See Timothy Hall, "Reification, Materialism & Praxis: Adorno's Critique of Lukács," *Telos* Vol. 145, Summer 2011.
6. Neil Larsen, "Lukács sans Proletariat, or Can *History and Class Consciousness* be Re-historicized," in [Title], ed. Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall (New York: Continuum Press, 2011), 81-100.
7. See chapter 6 of Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, (London: Athlone, 1981).