The relevance of critical theory to art today

J.M. Bernstein, Lydia Goehr, Gregg Horowitz, and Chris Cutrone

On Saturday, November 20, 2010, Platypus hosted a panel entitled "The Relevance of Critical Theory to Art Today" moderated by Chris Mansour at The New School for Social Research in New York. The panel consisted of philosophy professors J.M. Bernstein (The New School), Lydia Goehr (Columbia University), and Gregg Horowitz (Pratt Institute and Vanderbilt University), and Chris Cutrone, Adjunct Assistant Professor (School of the Art Institute of Chicago) and member of Platypus. What follows is an edited transcript of the event. Full video is available online at <http://newyork.platypus1917.org/what-is-critique-symposium-video-documents>.

Opening remarks

J.M. (Jay) Bernstein: Some 25 years ago, I asked Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson why two revolutionary Marxists spend so much time talking about Jane Austen. They replied, "Because that's where the bourgeoisie have pitched their tent." I felt that answer was true, but also insufficient. If the bourgeoisie have a stake in high culture, as one of the ways society reproduces itself, then it makes sense for Marxists to critique the practices that constitute high culture. But, beyond the issue of social integration, what stake do Marxists have in art?

The Marxist story runs something like this: By a certain moment, everyday life in modernity had become formed by the reduction of use-values to exchange-values, the fungibility and exchangeability of all material artifacts, the rule of technology, the rule of bureaucracy, the domination of capital markets, and the disenchantment of nature. Now, if you were Adorno, you would say that all of this amounts to the hegemony of instrumental reason over all forms of human reasoning. You would further say that art, in becoming purposeless, could become a refuge for another form of world address. Artworks are not fungible, not replaceable by one another, and not quantifiable. Rather, artworks make a claim on us simply by virtue of their material complexion, their ordering of sensual materials.

Modern art—I see modernism as the extension of modern art—is the attempt to think through this moment. First and foremost, the autonomy of art from politics, from science, from all the functions it might have in the world, was a world-historical calamity. Modern art begins as a kind of disaster. To understand the meaning of art is to understand the nature of that disaster. Art was taken out of the world and deposited in this realm where it has to make sense of its practice wholly in terms of itself. The puzzle of modern art is this functional emptiness that is nonetheless a form of content. First for Friedrich von Schiller, then for Adorno, the autonomy of art became a sort of opportunity. I think you can read all of modern art, right through high modernism into certain versions of postmodernism, as having embarked on the same project.

Yves-Alain Bois, along with all the writers who are part of what I will call "the aesthetic," agree in one way or another that the primary gesture of modern art is the tearing away from materials, ideologies, and formalisms. At first—that is, with Dutch Realism in the 17th century, as with Caravaggio and, later, Chardin—this tearing away is emancipatory. It frees art from religious and related forms of reference, allowing representations to become immanent in gesture, rather than exemplifying some presumptively eternal idea. It is here that we see art becoming autonomous. In this respect, modern art was part of the secularizing of the world, but with this secularization came the idea that a wholly secular world could be infinitely valuable. Thus, with secularization came the project of sacralizing the everyday, but in a wholly secular way.

However, this project became increasingly harassed and defensive as moderniy itself became an ideology, a series of forms of closure and domination. At that moment modernity ceased to be the emancipator, and became a problem. I would place that moment somewhere around 1848, with the failure of the bourgeois revolutions, though of course for some, notably Rousseau and Schiller, modernity had become a significant problem much earlier.

The notion of decoding, for Yves-Alain Bois, is broadly what Jacques Rancière means by the shift from the representational regime to the aesthetic regime. It is what Adorno means by the retreat of form in the face of materials that are in-formed, and what Gilles Deleuze means by the shift from representation to sensation. All of these I take to be riffs on the notion of purposefulness without purpose, which has this thought behind it: What painting provides is an account of our conviction in, and connection to, the world through visual experience. With modern art it became natural to find the authority of painting in its capacity to demonstrate how objects have a more than instrumental call on our capacity to live with them. That thought is fully there, for example, in Dutch Realism and in the tradition of the still life. By placing physical things in the visual environment and purifying them of any uplifting or instrumental features, by just letting them be there for our visual inspection, art returns us to this world. It allows us to be present to ourselves and for the world to be present to us.

This is both enthralling and a disaster, because it means that everyday life has begun to disintegrate. I think of *Van Gogh's Chair* (1888) as an eloquent moment connecting the dignity of the mere thing with the dignity of paint on canvas. Van Gogh's moment is just that, a moment in which object and canvas speak to one another, each lending the other its authority. In the very moments of art's so-called existential emptiness, of its not being about the world, there is the appearance of the world. This is art's power.

Philistines hate art for that moment of emptiness. This moment, at one level, is irredeemable. But this moment of emptiness is art's moment of fullness. Modern art imbricates and provides a refuge for a disenchanted but affirmative materialism in which objects could be meaningful in themselves, and not just in what they are useful for. These objects are sources of compelling experience amidst a world of sensory bombardment. They are a promise of happiness.

Though this promise is wildly different from Benjamin to Adorno to Rancière, these thinkers all avow some version of it. The promise is often taken to be insufficient as, after all, artworks are not life. What they promise is a different future, and in so doing artworks threaten to leave our present evacuated. This is the central difficulty of all modern art practices: If art has no other power than its mere presence, the attempt to provide it with political significance from the outside is always bound to fail. Art can only have what it offers, namely the salience of visual experience, by embracing the difficulty of that moment of protest by allowing for visual fullness.

Having said that, I need to return to where I began. This moment of protest in art only has cultural significance if the world cares about culture. I take the problem of the present not to be that art has gone awry, but that culture has gone awry. The bourgeoisie has discovered that capital can reproduce itself without social integration. Capital can get on very well with a dispersed, fragmented, wholly disarticulated cultural domain. The difficulty of modern art, in my judgement, is this: How can art address the problem of cultural weight when the bourgeoisie has disavowed it altogether?

Lydia Goehr: To Adorno critique is not the promise of happiness, nor the promise of freedom. It is always immanent critique, the turning of thought back upon itself. Asking the question, "What is critique?" might indicate that we have raised the very notion of critique to a concept. In that respect we fetishize the concept of critique, just as we have fetishized the concepts of "happiness," "life," "history," and so on. Critical theory is about the immanent critique of our language, which is to say, the language of our thought and the language of our concepts. Language is our concepts, our concepts are our social logics. The way in which we think through thought is by producing a challenge to that which has authority over us, namely our concepts, like "personality," "narrative," and "subject." The paradox, or the extreme difficulty, of doing immanent critique is that we have to use the tools that are the subject of our critique, so the critique always has to turn back on itself as an ongoing process. In that sense it has no external objects, although it is constantly mediated by the objects that are antithetical to our thinking—namely, things like works of art.

The real difficulty is that you can never break out of the thinking about thinking. You are constantly confronted by the things that have most authority over you, namely the concepts you are actually implying. I want to illustrate this by one example I like to use from the field of music. When we perform a musical work there's this idea of *Werktreue*, of being true to the work. We know that the work has authority over our performance insofar as we are performing a work, but Adorno suggests that the way we are true to a work is precisely by being untrue to it. What he meant was that, insofar as we perform the work against its grain, by not just trying to replicate it, but by playing with it, we challenge the authority that the work-concept has over us. To be true to the work ends up being untrue to the concept of the work. Performance of music, then, becomes a way to redeem something about the musical work, if the musical work is resisting the concept under which it falls, namely the concept of "a musical work."

This is the way that some of the so-called "social truth content" comes out of critique: It exposes the authority that concepts have over us. My suggestion is that one way to think about critique is in terms of looking for ways in our thinking to break the authority our thinking has over us. In that sense, there is nowhere to go outside of our own capacity to think.

Gregg Horowitz: I started really thinking about this panel around ten days ago. At the end of every day, it was almost tomorrow, which meant that the thoughts were already too late. I only found my way out of this conundrum through this extraordinary document that has been published in a recent issue of the *New Left Review*, of a discussion between Adorno and Horkheimer in 1956, which Greta Adorno recorded.[1] They discussed what it would mean to rewrite the *Communist Manifesto*. And I thought—*that's* a thought about today. It is visibly a

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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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thought about today. For such a project, you would think the main themes in connecting up the past, the present, and the future, would be something like this: The past was the revolution, the present is actually existing socialism, and the future depends on whether actually existing socialism points in a meaningful way to a socialism worth endorsing. But that's not what they talk about. Rather, the past is the party, understood as an audience whom a writer interested in socialism might address. Marx, after all, begins the *Communist Manifesto* with an address to the party. The future, then, is a question of who would care about the writing. And the present, it turns out, is largely a matter of motorbikes. This is Europe in 1956, and youths are riding on motorbikes all over, making pestiferous noise. The question kept occuring to Horkheimer and Adorno, "Why does everybody love motorbikes?" Now this seems to be what it means to think about the present: thinking about the sound of motorbikes roaring in your ears as you think through the party, on the one hand, and whom to address, on the other.

If our future is anywhere, the thought usually goes, it will be in the present. No other future can matter other than the future that is here in the present. This self-conscious entrenchment in the present reminds us that critical theory, both as it was articulated but also, more importantly, as we have to receive it, was not simply a response to social regression, but a *symptom* of social regression. As Adorno said, philosophy carries on because its moment of realization was missed. For philosophy, as for critical theory, something has migrated into the realm of thought that is somehow not at home in the realm of thought. In this sense philosophy is struck by the same regression that critical theory takes itself to be reflecting on.

To put this point in a more general register, thinking is not self-determining, but is always shaped by the practices out of which it emerges and to which it instinctively tries to return. The more it is frustrated in this endeavor, the more insistent it is to return. The idea that thinking is not self-determining represents the decay of a certain image of philosophy. At that point one wants to assert that the whole project of spinning a system of thought out of concepts is now simply behind us. It is for this reason that we can say that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud remain the central background figures, because they sought to think through, not the future completion, but the radical incompleteness of philosophy. That philosophy, of all disciplines, would be radically incomplete implies that all practices are radically incomplete. No thought, no practice, can cordon itself off from the social world of which it is a part. Critique wants to get behind the veil, to get to the bottom of things from which we can start over in the full light of truth. But precisely this impulse, this thought, has to be treated as symptomatic—it ends up inhibiting thought.

We always start exactly where we are. This is neither to say that nothing of the past is left, nor that everything is so thoroughly mediated that the origin has disappeared. Rather, there is no starting over because nothing of the past ever goes away. The urge to start over attests to a learned distrust in our capacity to remember, to sustain experience. Memory is weak, and in response to this weakness the feeling arises that things are going away, and we want to get back to the things themselves. This weakness is crucial to reflect on. For it is not in the strength, but in this moment of memory's weakness that the past rises up in the light of that future which we cannot determine in the present.

All understanding of the present has to start with the acknowledgement that we are not the future the past had in mind and that, for this reason, in some sense we stand in the way of the future the past had in mind. I do not know how to sustain this thought for long—it hurts. One task that we can pose to critique, insofar as we turn against ourselves in this moment of weakness, is to unlock another future—perhaps another modernity.

I am putting to critique the task of understanding the present, but to understand the present is to grasp it as if it has already passed away. In the dialogue between Adorno and Horkheimer, Adorno makes the comment that the horror of the present is that we live in a world where we cannot imagine a better one. To say that we live in a world where we cannot imagine a better one is to say that we cannot see this world as one that has passed away. We cannot see the present in the light of a future that the present does not intend. The standard line is that, for critical theory, to grasp the world as past has meant totalizing the world, or seeing it from the point of view of its completeness, with nothing falling outside the totality. But this is a limited conception of totalization. It is not merely that nothing falls outside, but that anything that does fall outside of the totality is a harbinger or an ambassador of a different world. This thought has been susceptible to a religious interpretation that I am going to do everything I can to avoid. Totalization in this respect is the precondition for opening up the cracks through which the light of the future can shine, right now, on the past and the present. Horkheimer says in his dialogue with Adorno, "I don't believe things will turn out well." And by "things" he means everything. But the thought that things might turn out well is indispensible. Nothing falls outside but the thought that something in the present does shine a light on the past.

With regard to art, I agree with Jay that modernist art has been taken up as a kind of self-overcoming of the present. Modernist art is not the future—Heaven forbid—but, rather, it is the light that shines from the future onto the past, the light whose uselessness is what the present does not yet know how to make use of. Adorno only articulated this thought retrospectively. That is, Adorno felt that the moment of modernist art's capacity to be this light had already passed. Modernist art had been absorbed by the culture industry.

The contrast between the culture industry and modernist art is often articulated so radically that absorption is thought of as cancellation. But absorption is not the same as negation. Rather, I think of absorption the way I think of how, when you wash your dishes, the sponge absorbs the odor of what is being discarded. It is retained in trace form. The inevitability of the absorption is clear once the demand for a different future has been articulated. Once made, that demand is already on the way to becoming a commodity. What we need is not a demand for another future, but for another past. We need the paradoxical demand of a past that will steer us toward a future that we cannot anticipate. From this it follows that no art practice can ever be "subversive." Art practices can be subverted, but no art practice can ever be subversive. Art is, and should be, too much in love with experience in the present to ever be subversive. For any art that is worth taking seriously, absorption in the culture industry seems inevitable.

However controversial this statement may be, I believe critical theory has before it now the task of demolishing the false overvaluation of art, in order to save us from the idea that art will save us. Perhaps critical theory is tasked with helping us to expect less of art. At one point in this exchange between Horkheimer and Adorno, Horkheimer says, "The more eager one is to break the taboo, the more harmless it is.... One must be very down to earth, measured, and considered so that the impression that something or other is not possible does not arise."[2] What Horkheimer calls for here is a toning down of the rhetoric, because with every moment of melodrama in the effort to cancel the present moment, we render the weight of the present moment insignificant. It becomes the occasion for a spectacular display of pathos, which Horkheimer is trying to resist. Perhaps what we should drive toward, critically, is lower expectations for art, so that we have an opportunity to experience, not our distance from, but our proximity to, what is better—though this proximity is also a kind of distance, and what is better remains obscure.

Chris Cutrone: The scholar of Benjamin's and Adorno's work, Susan Buck-Morss provided a pithy formulation for defining the tasks of both art and criticism in the modern era: "[Artists'] work is to sustain the critical moment of aesthetic experience; our job as critics is to recognize this."[3] Two aspects of Buck-Morss's formulation of the work of artists need to be emphasized—"sustaining the critical moment" and "aesthetic experience." The subjective experience of the aesthetic is what artists work on, and they do so in order to capture and sustain, or make available, subjectivity's "critical moment."

Adorno, in his 1932 essay "The Social Situation of Music," analogized the position of modern art to that of critical social theory: The role of both was to provoke recognition. Adorno further warned that there could be no progress in art without that of society. His posthumously published but unfinished monograph *Aesthetic Theory* can be considered to have at its center, organizing the entire discussion of the modern experience of art, the theme of the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of art. In this, Adorno was elaborating in the aesthetic realm his thesis in *Negative Dialectics*, that philosophy and critical theory were both necessary and impossible, simultaneously.

What does it mean to practice art in an epoch of its impossibility and continuing necessity? A clue can be found in Adorno's claim in *Negative Dialectics* that "philosophy lives on because its moment of realization was missed."[4] Adorno's treatment of philosophy and art is modeled on Marx's treatment of capital. The potential for a dialectical historical transformation, in which capital would be simultaneously realized and abolished, became for Adorno the question of what it would mean to simultaneously realize and overcome the aspirations of modern philosophy and art. What would it mean to overcome the necessity that is expressed in modern practices of art? The Hegelian thought figure of art's attaining to its own concept, while transcending it through a qualitative transformation, was mobilized by Adorno to grasp both the history of modern art and the desire to overcome its practices.

The Hegel scholar Robert Pippin, in his response to the journal *Critical Inquiry*'s 2003 forum on the current state and potential future for critical theory, described postmodernism as a repetition of the "Romantic recoil" from modernity.[5] Specifically, Pippin pointed to modern literary and artistic forms as derived from such Romanticism, of which postmodernism was the mere continuation, but in denial of its repetition. And Pippin pointed out that such repetition is in fact a "regression," because consciousness of the historical condition of the problem had grown worse.

Hegel posed the question of the "end" of art. He meant by this not the cessation of practices of art, but rather the ability of those practices to make the activity of "Spirit" appear in a self-contained and self-sufficient manner. While religion had been superseded by art, art had come to be superseded by "philosophy." By this, Hegel meant that art needed philosophical interpretation to be able to mean what it meant. Art needed criticism in order to be itself. This was a specifically modern condition for art, which Hegel addressed in a rather optimistic manner, seeing art's need for criticism as a hallmark of enlightenment rather than a disability or liability.

But Adorno took this Hegelianism with respect to art and turned it from an explanation of art's historical condition to a critique of those historical conditions. Like Marx who had turned Hegel on his head, or put Hegel back on his feet, Adorno inverted the significance of Hegel's philosophical observation. Where Hegel had, for instance, regarded modern politics as the realm of reflection on the state, and by extension the self-objectification of civil society in the state, Marx regarded the modern distinction between state and civil society as expressing the pathological necessity of capital, in which the self-contradiction of capital was projected. Adorno similarly addressed the complementary necessities of art and criticism as expressing a self-contradiction in (aesthetic) subjectivity.

As Adorno put it, however, this did not mean that one should aspire to any "reconciliation" of art and philosophy, nor of theory and practice. Just as Marx critiqued the Left Hegelians for their Romantic desire to merely dissolve the distinction between state and civil society, so too did Marx and Adorno alike regard this separation as the hallmark of freedom. In a late essay, "Marginalia to Theory and Practice" (1969), Adorno attacked "Romantic socialism" for wanting to dissolve the distinction and critical relationship between theory and practice, maintaining that, by contrast with traditional society, the modern separation of theory and practice was "progressive" and emancipatory. So too was the separation in meaning between art, as non-conceptual knowledge, and criticism, informed by theoretical concepts.

Adorno, like Marx, looks forward, not to a return to a pre-modern or pre-capitalist unity of theory and practice, nor to a reconciliation of form and content, as had been the case in traditional culture, but to a qualitative transformation of the modern division of meaning in art and criticism, in which each would be simultaneously realized and abolished as presently practiced. The problem is that, rather than being raised to ever more acute levels, there was already in Adorno's lifetime a retreat from the productive antagonism, the dialectic of theory and practice, or in this case art and criticism.

Adorno drew upon and sought to further elaborate the approach of his friend and mentor Walter Benjamin, who argued in his 1934 essay "The Author as Producer" that no art could be of correct "political tendency" unless it was also of good aesthetic quality.[6] Furthermore, Benjamin argued that every great work of art "either founds or dissolves a genre."[7] As Benjamin put it, the work of art that fails to teach artists teaches no one. Artists do not "distribute" aesthetic experience, but produce it. New art re-works and transforms, retrospectively, the history of art. Benjamin argued that there could be no progress in society without that of art, for necessarily involved in both is the transformation of subjectivity.

The history of modern art, as Benjamin and Adorno recognized, presents a diverse multiplicity of practices, none of which has been able to come to full fruition. Benjamin described this poignantly in his *Arcades Project* as "living in hell."[8] Benjamin and Adorno's thought-figure for such historical consciousness of modern art comes from Trotsky, who pointed out, in a June 1938 letter to the editors of the American journal *Partisan Review*, that the modern capitalist epoch displayed the following phenomenon in its historical course:

> [N]ew tendencies take on a more and more violent character, alternating between hope and despair. The artistic schools of the [first] few decades [of the 20th century]—cubism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism—follow each other without reaching a complete development. Art, which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected, suffers most from the decline and decay of bourgeois society.[9]

This was because, as Trotsky put it,

> The decline of bourgeois society means an intolerable exacerbation of social contradictions, which are transformed inevitably into personal contradictions, calling forth an ever more burning need for a liberating art. Furthermore, a declining capitalism already finds itself completely incapable of offering the minimum conditions for the development of tendencies in art which correspond, however little, to our epoch.... The oppressed masses live their own life. Bohemianism offers too limited a social base.[10]

Trotsky said of art that, "a protest against reality, either conscious or unconscious, active or passive, optimistic or pessimistic, always forms part of a really creative piece of work. Every new tendency in art has begun with rebellion."[11] And not merely rebellion against existing conventions of art, but against the conditions of life in capitalism.

But what, then, would be a "liberating art?" Adorno addresses this in terms of the aspiration for "artistic autonomy," or the self-justification of aesthetic experience. This is related to how Kant described the experience of the beautiful, in nature or art, as the sympathetic resonance the subject experiences of an object, which thus appears to embody "purposiveness without purpose," or a *telos*—an end-in-itself. Except, for Adorno, this empathy between subject and object in Kant's account of aesthetic experience is not affirmative, but critical. In Adorno's account of the modern experience of art, the subject recognizes not the power of experiential capacities and the transformative freedom of the human faculties, but rather their constraint and unfreedom, their self-contradictory and self-undermining powers. The subject experiences not its freedom in self-transformation, but rather the need for transformation in freedom. Adorno emphasized that the autonomy of art, as of the subject, remains under capitalism an aspiration rather than an achieved state. Works of art embody the striving for autonomy that is denied the subject of the modern society of capital, and thus artworks also embody failure. Hence, the history of art furnishes a rich inventory of failed attempts. This is why this history remains unsettled and constantly returns. Modern works of art are necessarily failures, but are nonetheless valuable as embodiments of possibility, of unfulfilled potential.

The constrained possibilities embodied in modern art are, according to Benjamin's formulation, approached by the subject with a combination of "desire and fear." Modern artworks embody not only human but "inhuman" potentials—that is, the possibilities for the qualitative transformation of humanity, which we regard with desire and fear. They thus have simultaneously utopian and dystopian aspects. Modern artworks are as ambivalent as the historical conditions they refract in themselves, "prismatically." But it is in such ambivalence that art instantiates freedom. It is the task of theory, or critique, to register the non-conceptual while attempting to bring it within the range of concepts. As Adorno put it, the aspiration of modern art is to "produce something without knowing what it is."[12] In so doing, art acts not only on the future, but also on history.

Modern artworks find inspiration in art history. This is the *potentially* emancipatory character of repetition. Artists are motivated by art history to re-attain lost moments by achieving them again, but differently. Artists produce new works that, in their newness, unlock the potentials of past art, allowing us to re-experience history. But this work on history is not without its dangers. As Benjamin put it, "even the dead are not safe" from the ambivalent "progress" of history, because this history unfolds in capital as a "mounting catastrophe."[13] The history of modern art, like that of capital more generally, furnishes a compendium of ruins. The simultaneously progressive and regressive dynamics of history find their purchase in this: that historical forms of experience and consciousness inform present practices, for better or worse. It is the work of critique to attempt to better inform, through greater consciousness, the inevitable repetition in the continuing practices of art, and thus attempt to overcome the worst effects of the regression involved in such practices.

In the Hegelian sense adopted by both Marx and Adorno, the greater consciousness of freedom is the only available path for freedom's possible realization. Consciousness is tasked to recognize the potential that is its own condition of possibility. This is why Adorno and Benjamin addressed works of art as forms of consciousness. Art can be ideological or it can enlighten, provoking consciousness to push itself further.

The dialectic of art and criticism is necessary for the vitality of art. The self-abnegation of criticism, on the other hand—the disenchantment of consciousness that characterized "postmodernism"—has clearly demonstrated the barrenness of such abdication of responsibility on the part of critics and theorists more so than artists, who were thus left at the mercy of poor, unclarified concepts. The challenge posed by modern critical-theoretical approaches to art has been warded off rather than engaged and pushed further.

Artists' work continues to demand critical recognition, whether the critics recognize this or not. What such critical recognition of the work of history taken up by art would mean is what Marxist aesthetic theorists like Adorno and Benjamin pursued, and from whose efforts we can and indeed must learn. For a new condition of art has not been attained, but only an old set of conditions repeated, without their repetition being properly recognized. The relation between art and social modernity, or capital, continues to task both art and theory. Art is not merely conditioned by, but is itself an instance of the modern society of capital. But, like society, for art to progress, theory must do its work.

Panelists' responses

LG: Chris, you seemed to read Adorno's distinction between regression and progression as if progress is simply the bit we want, but it seems to me that Adorno's point was that the progressive and the regressive are two sides of the same coin, both of which lead to catastrophe.

CC: In Benjamin and Adorno's philosophy of history, which they are deriving from Marx, capital is simultaneously progressive and regressive. Capital progresses through a kind of recursive movement, and so they understand overcoming capital as also *completing* capital. Benjamin and Adorno take up the concept of *Aufhebung*—the sublation, the realization through negation, or the self-overcoming—to articulate this "completion." Art, far from being outside capital, is part and parcel of capital's historical movement. Art moves historically through a "progress," if you will, of progress and regress—like capital. Of course, this raises the question of emancipation. Colloquially, progress is usually thought of in these terms: "Are we making progress? Is progress progress? Or, is it actually progress in domination, in which case it is not progress?" I feel that an unfamiliar aspect of Benjamin and Adorno's thought is an idea they take from Marx, which complicates the relationship between progress and regress: Capital moves through a process of the discontents capital itself produces. The opposition to capital that these discontents engender form the basis for the reconstitution of capital in a new form, though there are important differences in the form these discontents take. You can have a system of discontents that advances capital in one way, or in a completely different way.

To take perhaps the most dramatic example, I'm sure we are familiar with the anti-totalitarian idea that communism and fascism are simply two sides of the same coin. In a way, for Benjamin and Adorno, fascism *was* the necessary doppelgänger of communism, in that both communism and fascism had an ambivalent relationship to the progress and regress of capital. Nevertheless, one could distinguish between communism and fascism, as Benjamin and Adorno themselves did. One could distinguish between how the contradiction of capital is being pushed through communism versus the way it was being pushed, in a more obscure manner, through fascism. One salient point here would be Wilhelm Reich's argument, in "Ideology as a Material Force" (1933), that Marxists had failed to recognize the progressive character of fascism, which of course did not mean that Reich found fascism "progressive." Rather, Reich meant that fascists were more in tune with the ambivalent progress and regress of capital than the Marxists were. The Marxists, in a sense, were helpless in the face of the progress of capital—therefore, the ambivalent progress of capital took the form of fascism rather than communism in Germany.

GH: Of course, after 1848, modernity becomes not the solution, but the problem. However, I resist a certain version of the argument which posits that, since modernity is the problem, there must be something which is not modernity that provides, if not the solution, at least the answer. The full secularization of history entails that there is nothing outside history. So I think modernity has to be the answer to the problem it raises. In my remarks I held up what I am calling "another modernity," which I acknowledge to be only a sort of marker. It is possible we may have to make out this other modernity by figuring out, again, the difference between communism and fascism, though I find this possibility a bit dreadful. However, this would mean withdrawing from the language of disaster and catastrophe—a withdrawal I would justify on the basis of Adorno's resistance to pessimism. Pessimism is the conviction that things will inevitably get worse. But, for Adorno, it is the dark gift of history that this is false. The only gift of having survived 1945 is the dead certainty that things cannot get any worse. From this anti-pessimistic thought, I think there must emerge something like an anti-catastrophic line of thinking.

JB: You would have to think past Adorno to do that, though. I keep pointing back to early modern art, and to what I have called the "secular sacralization" of the everyday. I do this because one of the things Adorno themetized, but did not see in the art he loved, was the burden of giving everyday life the intensity and fullness of satisfactions once found in religious forms of life. Adorno and Benjamin were overly impressed by the sacred, or the messianic, and this was their worst temptation. If they were alive now, I fear they would be doing political theology, which is the worst thing to happen in political thought since Carl Schmitt. As I see it, Adorno's anti-representationalism ultimately led him to think of what was utopian in distorted ways.

CC: Your critique of Benjamin and Adorno points to the difference between understanding modernity as post-Renaissance, versus understanding modernity as post-1848.

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Art after 1848 is about disenchantment, secularization, and sacralization of the everyday, but in a fundamentally different way than the art from the Renaissance period through the Romantic period, up until the time of Hegel. This difference hinges on the difference between Kant and Hegel, on the one hand, and Marx, on the other, which should not be understood simply as a difference in thinking. Rather, it is a matter of the real historical difference between the pre-1848 and post-1848 world, which makes it necessary to pose quite differently the question of Enlightenment, disenchantment, desacralization, and resacralization.

Jay, I think you have posed art as occupying a space outside capital, outside modernity, representing a romantic response to the instrumentalization of the world. I believe there were elements of this in Lydia's remarks as well. In contrast, I think Adorno and Benjamin challenge us to see how art also becomes instrumental reason, in the sense that art is an instrument of capital. It is not as though there is reason that is used instrumentally, and reason that is not used instrumentally. Rather, reason becomes instrumentalized by capital so that the Enlightenment becomes a more ambiguous phenomenon after 1848. There is a reversal of means and ends after 1848 such that one can no longer understand capital as the advance of Enlightenment, but can only see the Enlightenment as the means of capital. Rather than "non-conceptual knowledge," Adorno and Benjamin see art as part of the reason of capital, but also, therefore, as bearing the ambivalence of capital and potentially making that ambivalence recognizable.

A similar difficulty, which came up in Gregg's presentation, is getting beyond an understanding of emancipation in terms of cracks or fragments in society. This conception of emancipation traces back to a kind of Romantic Counter-Enlightenment, from which Marx and, thus, Benjamin and Adorno, would have to be distinguished. I take great issue with the claim that Adorno and Benjamin were enchanted by the sacred. Like Hegel, they were tasked with understanding continuity and change in the desacralization of the world. Hegel had to account for the ways that religious metaphysics remain with us in spite of, and even through, the disenchantment of the world. Kant and Hegel understood this in the sense that religion was a prior form of reason, but I do not think they argue for a Romantic re-enchantment of the sacred against the disenchanted world. Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno certainly do not.

LG: This treats Adorno and Benjamin as if they are producing a theory of society or a theory of art in a traditional sense—that is, taking a step back, coming up with a theory, and then imposing it upon society, art, or capitalism. What Adorno and Benjamin share in their writing is precisely this turning back on themselves to ask how, actually, does one write about this. They always turn back on the structures of thought and writing.

CC: I don't think I implied that Adorno and Benjamin felt they could step outside their object of critique. They consider their own thinking symptomatic of capital, which means that they understand their own opposition to capital as itself being a symptom of capital. In this sense the only difference they could establish between their own thinking and others' was the measure of self-clarification and self-awareness they achieved, which is an issue of the philosophy of history. There is a difficulty in understanding what opposition to capitalism means. The usual approach is to look at how capital breaks down—to look for apparent cracks, which provide the grounds for "resistance." This is the typical language of the Left in the late 20th century, down to the present. In contrast, Benjamin and Adorno follow from Marx in recognizing that it is not the case that capital moves by a smooth logic, interrupted by moments of collapse representing something outside of capital. Rather, part of what makes capital an "alienated" logic is that it is no logic at all; it reproduces itself not in spite of, but precisely through breakdown, resistance, discontents, and a host of contingent or "spontaneous" factors.

There is an undigested Romantic legacy, in the wake of 1789, of positioning oneself, along with all humanity, under the treads of history. This tends toward a one-sided understanding of capital as instrumental reason, whereas in fact Adorno and Benjamin, like Marx and Hegel, are actually trying to overcome a Romantic rejection of modernity. Trying not to fall on one side of that Romantic rejection is hard without seeming to speak from some kind of objective view outside of the phenomenon, but I think that is primarily an issue of style and presentation.

Q & A

In your comments, Gregg, you said that returning to the distinction between fascism and communism seemed dreadful. But what hope for the redemptive power of art, or even of thought itself, exists outside of the hope for socialism, a movement that the revolutionary Marxist tradition understood as the attempt, for the first time, to put social relations under the dominion of social consciousness?

GH: My expression of despair was only at the prospect of having to frame the problem that way. The articulation of socialism necessarily involves the retrieval of the emancipatory moment of "actually existing socialism." But what must we return to in order to retrieve this emancipatory moment? I don't have an answer to that, but if there is an answer afoot, we need to hear it. Several times in the last month I have heard the following remarkable thought—and when I say remarkable I simply mean I want to know more—that Khrushchev represented an actual breakthrough, from which we might retrieve a different practice of communism. That is the kind of thought that I do not know how to make use of, even in trying to think about what you and I share, which is a view of socialism as the horizon of emancipatory political practice.

Jay, in your remarks you have described our culture as being problematic in its relation to art, which I took to mean that we have a "wrong culture." What do you mean by this?

JB: "Wrong culture" would be optimistic. I am interested in how the culture question has lapsed. It was standard even in the 1960s to articulate how system integration, the way in which various institutions make capital reproduction possible, required social integration, whereby people would have harmonious beliefs, values, and ideals. At a certain moment, capital recognized that this was not strictly necessity, and that people did not actually need a whole lot of ideological forming. My claim is that an image of radical culture was parasitic on the idea that there was a dominant culture. There is no longer a coherent dominant culture against which to mount a critique that could push forward the formation of an alternative political will. This is what requires us to rethink the notion of critique.

CC: I think the world appears to lack a common culture holding the system together because the common culture that exists is poorly recognized. Counterintuitively, I think there are a great deal of assumptions shared by Islamic fundamentalists, Christian fundamentalists, postmodern bohemians, and so on, but these common assumptions go unrecognized and unremarked. These assumptions have become ideology in a classic sense. The task would be provoking recognition of this commonality in order to make legible the unity of the opposites in our world, rather than thinking that we live in some sort of cultural plurality that resists any attempt to understand it as a totality. That this appears to be the case is simply an artifact of our failure to understand it. One could just as well make a plausible argument, from the standpont of the 19th century, that the world was being held together without a hegemonic culture in 1830, 1848, or 1870. The task would be to find the hegemonic culture that is there, but which is completely naturalized.

LG: But are we talking here about culture with a small C, or *Kultur* with a capital K?

GH: I had a version of that question in mind. In a review of the Anselm Kiefer art show that appeared recently in the *New York Times*, Roberta Smith hauled out of the dustbin of history a critical concept you almost never see anymore: She referred to Kiefer as a "middlebrow painter."[14] The concept seemed archaic to me. Even though it was clearly meant as a slander, "middlebrow" had none of the negative charge it used to have. Suddenly there was, in the concept of middlebrow, a whiff of democracy. It sounded optimistic, as though it is something to aspire to. So, I don't mean to imply by this that Anselm Kiefer is a great painter or anything, but reading this review of his work suggested to me that, whatever might come to count as a common culture, it is definitely not going to be culture with a capital K—it is not going to be a matter of cultivation, in that sense.

JB: With respect to what I am calling the breakdown or the loss of culture, I am thinking about what goes on, for instance, in Philip Roth's novel *American Pastoral*, which captures how ideality or hopefulness is no longer available as something that could be transformative. It is not simply "ideology," or a series of false beliefs, that make a culture, even with a small C. There has to be a notion of ideality. That notion, which appeared in Germany under the phrase "critique of pure cynicism," really has its American moment now, and it is that difficulty I was pointing to.

LG: From that, it follows that the real confrontation now would not be between critical theory and capital, directly, but between critical theory and democracy. This is really where the issue is for politics.

CC: The word I want to introduce into the discussion is "kitsch." Maybe we now have kitsch culture and kitsch politics. There are interesting parallels between Clement Greenberg and Benjamin and Adorno. It is interesting that Greenberg foregrounds the question of democracy by treating avant-garde and kitsch as symptoms of democracy. But in this way Greenberg also raises the question of the relationship between capital and democracy. The culture industry was a concept that Adorno meant to embrace high art as well. Schoenberg and Stravinsky were also a part of the culture industry. In that respect I think one has to see how avant-garde and kitsch practices subsist on a common ground and how Schoenberg and Stravinsky are two sides of the same coin. Adorno certainly was not just a partisan for Schoenberg over Stravinsky, which is how Adorno is usually read.

A few of you tonight have touched upon the concept that an artwork is not successful unless critique is doing its job. But what is critique's job description, so to speak, in relation to art today? And what should it be?

LG: It is not that art will not function unless critique does its job, but that critique is this ongoing process of rethinking what is being asserted. One of the reasons Adorno admired Schoenberg was that he thought you could not reduce Schoenberg to whistling, and this meant that in some way Schoenberg was not assimilable by the culture—in its form it would always rub up against culture. If you understood what it was that made Schoenberg so difficult and so unassimilable, so unwhistleable, you could perhaps understand again what was amazing about a Beethoven symphony or even, in my view, a Puccini opera like *La Bohème*. This is where I think even Adorno got himself wrong, in that he made too many blanket statements about the kind of music that was subsumable by this society. The real resistant potential is to try and listen to Puccini as a great composer, not to listen to Puccini as a composer under the conditions of commodification.

CC: I don't think Schoenberg was unassimilable—if anything, his work was assimilated. But I also do not think that Adorno thought Schoenberg was unassimilable, and so I don't think unassimilability is what Adorno valued

"Critical theory" continues below

Critical theory, continued from above

in Schoenberg. Adorno talks about Schoenberg and the culture industry in terms of "the inevitable" versus "the incomprehensible," as a sort of antinomy within a historical moment of the culture industry. Inevitability and incomprehensibility are, to Adorno, two aspects of the same thing. The operation of capital is not comprehensible by individuals but it is clearly socially assimilable. In this sense, capital is inevitable and incomprehensible. What Adorno valued about Schoenberg was that, in Schoenberg, you cannot escape that simultaneous inevitability and incomprehensibility as easily as you can escape it by putting on Puccini, for instance, or Stravinsky, who gives you the comprehensible sublime.

In your comments, Jay, you have proposed the everyday as a different route to go besides the messianic or sacred. But how is the everyday supposed to get beyond all the problems you have raised with shareability, for instance? Doesn't everydayness run into all the same problems we run into with culture?

JB: I think the everyday has always been the question for modern art. Whatever we might mean by modernity, it has to be the thought of a wholly secular form of life. What we don't know is what shareability is going to look like. That is something art practices will need to invent, in the sense of figuring out, as they go along, variations on this idea of immanent sharebility, which comes out of the practice itself and yet remains a practice. What makes art particular, at least for me, is that it bears this burden.

I think the theme of the failure of postmodernism to advance historical consciousness has not been fully fleshed out. What is it about how post modernism saw art that has left us with less access to historical self-awareness or consciousness?

CC: There have been assumed but, unfortunately, naturalized and invisible categories we have used in discussing art and critique, and I think the invisibility of these categories points to problems of historical consciousness. In a sense, we necessarily read figures like Adorno or Benjamin—or, as I pointed out before, Marx—in terms of categories that they themselves wanted to transcend. One thinks of how the classic postmodernist art critics, the *October* group, separated the avant-garde from modernism. I do not think critics like Benjamin and Adorno, or Clement Greenberg for that matter, would have accepted the opposition of the avant-garde to modernism in the way that postmodern critics superimpose on the history of modern art. Similarly, the relationship between Romanticism and modernism has been a troubled one throughout our discussion. To the degree there has been a critique of Adorno and Benjamin, the critique was of a residual Romanticism they purportedly exhibit. That they appear to retain a Romantic understanding of modernity is itself a signal of how much influence postmodernism, and particularly postmodern art criticism, has exerted on how we think about modernism. Thus, for instance, modernist art becomes a kind of secular religion. A return to these figures as points of reference—especially Adorno, as someone who anticipated but preceded emphatic postmodernism in art criticism—is salient today precisely to the extent it allows us to estrange ourselves from these kinds of rhetorics. We should resist the notion of Adorno and Benjamin as mandarin intellectuals and holdover Romantics, and we should resist a Romantic conception of modernism, whether we use that term positively or negatively. I say this in hopes of at least pointing to how our discussion bears the damage that has been done by the way we talk about art after postmodernism. Our discussion bears the traces of an abdication of criticism over at least the last 40 years, since Adorno's time. In all the ways we have talked about the modern work of art—in terms of whether modernism is finished or unfinished, how it subsists, how and why it is still necessary, and so on—I think we have been forced to concede something. | **P**

1. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto?" *New Left Review* 65 (September-October 2010). This document is available in full at <http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2860>.
2. Ibid.
3. Susan Buck-Morss, reply to "Visual Culture Quesionnaire," *October* 77 (Summer, 1996), 29.
4. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 3.
5. Robert Pippin, "*Critical Inquiry* and Critical Theory: A Short History of Nonbeing," *Critical Inquiry* 30:2. Available online at <http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/issues/v30/30n2.Pippin.html>.
6. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," *Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 220–238.
7. Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 201.
8. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the 19th Century: Exposé of <1939>," *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1999), 14–26.
9. Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics in Our Epoch," <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/06/artpol.htm>.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Theodor Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," *Quasi una Fantasia* (New York: Verso, 1998), 322.
13. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, 253–264.
14. Roberta Smith, "A Spectacle with a Message," *The New York Times*, November 18, 2010. Available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/19/arts/design/19kiefer.html>.

Meinhof, continued from page 2

feminist Action Council for the Liberation of Women, a group that formed in West Berlin in 1968 and had spread across the country by 1969. What Meinhof's title meant was that, true to the slogan, socialist students did not talk about "the weather"— meaning the everyday, the banal, the habitual, and the ingrained. But they should. Bauer's inclusion of this article as the centerpiece of the collection captures Meinhof's pioneering efforts in turning attention to the personal in a way that foregrounded gender as an organizing category of ongoing inequality, even within the student movement. Indeed, it is Meinhof's more personal writings that retain the most force at 40 years' remove. We see the empathy that moved her in pieces like the 1968 column that recounts the abusive upbringing of a child murderer, including the moment when he was made to despise his homosexuality—what she calls "his best quality." Meinhof's writings remind us that politics, shaped by events that demand analysis, are nonetheless underwritten by emotion and psychology. Later RAF tracts made blank fury the sole register of politics. Following the brutal chain of events through Meinhof's columns and Bauer's introduction, from the early years of the Vietnam War, now historically distant, to the proximate blows of police truncheons in the late 1960s, we can understand the anger but also see its limits.

The fascination with 1970s armed militancy in recent years has raised the question, "Why Meinhof, now?" The answer surely lies in frustration at the apparent futility of conventional activism against the U.S.-led War on Terror. Yet Bauer's collection poses a more important question: "Which Meinhof now?" This volume gives English readers the Meinhof that was eclipsed when she went underground. Meinhof's 1960s insights are less readily transferable to the present, or to the silver screen for that matter, than are the 1970s RAF communiqués. Nonetheless, these earlier insights suggest an alternative mode of political engagement to that of the vigilante martyr we may think we know. But to what effect? From the standpoint of an academic, it is soothing to think that writing might be the signature act of political engagement in troubling times. One wonders if the image of Meinhof as a columnist does not serve its own compensatory function, allowing a sense of identification not with the guerrilla in Ray-Bans, but the stewing deskbound critic. Is Meinhof at her typewriter a readier icon for a 21st century left, which does most of its politics at the keyboard and on the screen? Isn't there a virtue in the 1970s Meinhof's reminder that politics may also entail the deployment and even endangerment of our own bodies? After Bauer's volume, people will continue to find the Ulrike they need. Its value lies in giving voice to the corpse Richter depicts in his famous blurred portraits—a voice reminding us that Ulrike's violent revolt happened only after a long and maddening decade of thinking, convincing, and arguing in an inhospitable society. | **P**

1. Don DeLillo, "Baader-Meinhof," *New Yorker*, April 1, 2002, 78.

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defeat, and that more recent efforts to rectify the problem by "destabilizing" all identities have proven obscurantist and disorienting. But Wolf identifies the politics of identity and after as a retreat from something called "the working class." This seems, at first, obviously true: Didn't identity politics authorize the switch in focus from class to gender, race, and sexuality?

But the half-truth stonewalls a more troubling story: The obvious shift was only a symptom of a larger decay of the project to overcome capitalism. In place of the political attempt to seize power, transform social relations, and emancipate humanity, activists turned towards the attempt to end distinct and narrowly defined "oppressions." The retreat was not made by middle-class reformers, but by the Left itself—by organizations including the ISO. Wolf gestures to the classic Trotskyist formula of a revolution betrayed, but refuses to take responsibility herself for its ongoing betrayal.

This retreat may have, at the time, seemed to appear rational, even pragmatic. When the established institutions like political parties and trade unions have sold out the project of freedom, can't we build up constituencies for revolution by appealing to mass struggles? But even judged on its own limited terms, the attempt failed. Oppressions were not overcome. Inequality flourished through the 1970s and persists to this day. "International revolution" may, in the face of 'concrete social struggles' seem distant, useless, abstract. Why read? We need to march.

Let the problem be stated as baldly as possible. Wolf seems to believe that the "mass movement" of the 1960s was sold out and somehow duped by some unholy combination of corporate interests and Jacques Lacan. The story allows her to shift all responsibility away from the Left (her left) and persist in the illusion that the miniature dramas—she mentions the brief occupation of the Republic Doors and Windows factory in 2008—as signs of a coming insurrection.

Wolf's reasoning relies on a sleight of hand. She shows us what overcoming capitalism might mean for sexual freedom, and shows the historical achievements of revolutionary socialism in this struggle. Then (keep your eyes on her hands) she slips into a description of the inanities of contemporary left politics. An association emerges: Somehow, Marxism means marching for marriage equality.

It is time to stop lying to the young. There are no answers to their questions, no revolutionary politics available. Not yet! Perhaps Wolf fears that such honesty would depoliticize and besides, "We need to be where the struggle is." But if Marxism is ever to become what it once was and could be, it cannot be sustained on a diet of lies. Your seventeen-year-old self was more intelligent than you might think: You could handle the truth. | **P**

1. The statement taking credit for the action against the HRC was released and widely disseminated on the Internet. It can be found in full at <http://www.anarchistnews.org/?q=node/9869>.

Book Review: Karin Bauer, ed., Everybody Talks About the Weather—We Don't: The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008.

Quinn Slobodian

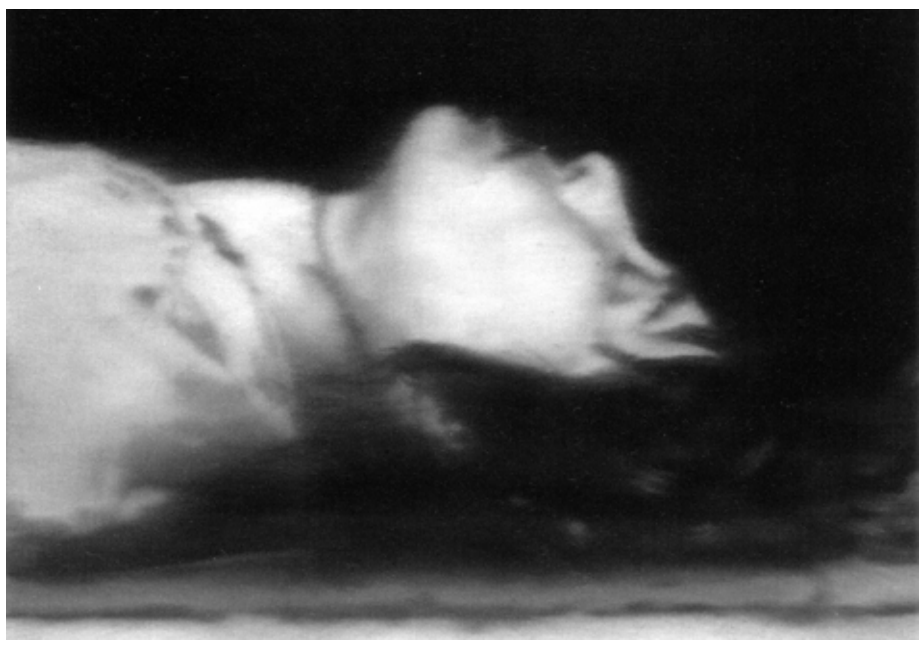
DON DELILLO BEGINS a short story from 2002 with a woman in a New York museum staring at a painting of Ulrike Meinhof after her suicide. He writes, "She thought of Meinhof, she saw Meinhof as first name only, Ulrike."[1] Who is this "Ulrike" that the Left has known? They know that she was a founding member of the leftwing terrorist group Red Army Faction (RAF), dubbed by the media the Baader-Meinhof Gang. They know that Meinhof's insistence on direct action against governments complicit in the Vietnam War led to a series of thefts, bank robberies, and bombings until her arrest in 1972 and death in 1976. They know her face from the portrait on her wanted poster, where her eyes turn down and away, from the stylized photos taken by Astrid Proll in the underground, or from Gerhard Richter's blurred portrait in the Museum of Modern Art, where DeLillo's character meets it. For the woman in the museum, as for many, Meinhof is a leftwing Madonna, a First World Che, to be filled with the sentiments of viewers who feel an intimacy without knowing much about her.

German studies scholar Karin Bauer's edited volume addresses this gap, reminding us that Meinhof was a journalist before she became the face of armed struggle. Throughout the 1960s, most Germans would have known Ulrike from the headshot that ran above her monthly columns in the influential leftist magazine *Konkret*. There she held a pen and stared at the viewer with the critic's look of patient exasperation. In her brief foreword to Bauer's volume, Elfriede Jelinek calls it a tragedy that Meinhof's writing ended in the "pitiless barked commands" of the RAF's pseudo-military communiqués. Her columns had represented something quite different. They were the longest running and arguably most successful attempt made by the New Left to use the medium of print to oppose mainstream opinion in a public sphere increasingly dominated by images. As the vanguard of the student movement turned to pudding bombs, "flash mobs," and eggings to get the media's attention, Meinhof was a stalwart participant in the media. In 1967, she criticized a group of students arrested for planning the assassination of visiting U.S. Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey. "Instead of steering the excited attention they garnered toward Vietnam," she wrote, "they talked about themselves" (229). The call for self-effacement through service in Meinhof's writings, which echoes her Lutheran upbringing, contrasts with the way discussion over the last 40 years has fixated on her personality rather than the causes for which she fought. Bauer's collection of 24 of Meinhof's columns redirects attention from her status as the mute icon of a generation and a nation toward the issues that formed the substance of her politics. In doing so, Bauer restores intellectual complexity to a figure often reduced to raw emotion.

Bauer's emphasis on complexity is both a virtue and a shortcoming of the book. Meinhof's writings are artifacts of her moment. Readers without knowledge of West Germany in the 1960s may get lost in the details and the often cumbersome sentences. It is unclear, for instance, how Meinhof's description of a Cold War summit in 1960, her critique of the West German Constitution from 1962, or her writing on the new visa regulations for West Germans entering East Germany in 1968, holds any relevance today. Meinhof's later RAF writings, frequently translated and printed by small radical presses since the 1970s, were largely severed from historical particularity, ensuring a readership among activists keen to apply her free-floating insights to their own place and time. By contrast, her 1960s columns are so grounded in the details of contemporary West Germany that they risk becoming historical curiosities limited to scholarly interest.

Aware of this danger, Bauer provides an 86-page introduction that seeks to establish the social and political context of Meinhof's columns for a general audience. She sketches the history of the RAF in the 1970s and the wedge that split the Old Left of the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions from the New Left of socialist students and intellectuals in the 1960s. Meinhof, who was born in 1934, belonged to a generation just prior to the "'68ers" and participated actively in the debates at the end of the 1950s. Meinhof vocally opposed the Christian Democratic government's desire to rearm the military, as well as their suppression of domestic dissent through the outlawing of the Communist Party in 1956. Her early writings were sympathetic to the Soviet credo of "peaceful coexistence," up to and including her 1960 assertion that "the Soviet Union is the country least affected or irritated by internal difficulties or disagreements with its allies" (106). Written four years after Russian tanks rolled into Budapest, such statements strained her credibility as an independent critic then, as they do now.

Bauer points out that the grounds for Meinhof's good will toward the Soviets had a material component. *Konkret*, which Meinhof edited and her husband Klaus Rainer Röhl published, was funded by the East German government until 1964. It was Meinhof and Röhl's daughter, Bettina Röhl, who generated great publicity



Gerhard Richter, *Tote* (detail), oil on canvas 62 cm x 67 cm, 1988 (Museum of Modern Art).

by revealing the East German connection in 2006. Röhl expands on these revelations in the afterword that was her condition for granting the rights to republish her mother's early work. With clear malice, and not a little cathartic glee, Röhl exploits the East German link as grounds to reduce everything written in the magazine to expressions of "infiltration" from the East. But Röhl overplays the socialist state's influence. After all, circulation of *Konkret* had grown twenty-fold, to a peak of 200,000 copies in 1967, well after the termination of East German funding. That the nature of the magazine had changed considerably by that time is obfuscated by the book's non-chronological arrangement. As Bauer mentions, soft pornography became the magazine's stock-in-trade, doubtlessly accounting for much of this increase in sales. More telling, though, is what led to the termination of GDR funding in the first place. The East Germans, following the conservative Soviet line, had become frustrated with *Konkret*'s glowing reports of China and the Cuban Revolution. Worried about maintaining supremacy in the world socialist camp, the East Germans cut off an organ that celebrated the possibility that leadership might emerge from the Third World rather than Moscow.

The title of the edited volume, *Everybody Talks About the Weather—We Don't*, taken from a 1969 column, points to some of the strongest elements of Meinhof's writing after the 1964 split. The title references an ad created by the West German railroad company in 1967 to boast of their weatherproof trains. Socialist students reused the slogan in a 1968 poster alongside the profiles of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. The poster was a provocation to the anticommunist mainstream and also asserted the blustery academic seriousness of the student New Left, who were presumably too busy talking about the revolution to talk about anything so trivial as the weather.

Meinhof flipped the slogan's meaning when she used it as the title of a 1969 column about the potential deportation of her personal friend Bahman Nirumand, an Iranian intellectual who had been crucial in mobilizing West German students against the Shah's regime. She argued that it should not be taboo to use the effect that Nirumand's expulsion had on his German wife and daughter as the grounds for protest. To pay attention to the family was not, for Meinhof, "humanitarian," i.e., soft liberal and apolitical, but was a defensible concern of socialist politics. Meinhof argued that the failure to address the position of Nirumand's wife reflected the New Left's larger blind spot about ongoing female subjugation in socialist circles. Though it is a commonplace to think of feminism as a legacy of the New Left, it first emerged as an organized force in West Germany as a critique of male domination within the New Left. In this column and others, Meinhof shows the effect of her collaboration with the

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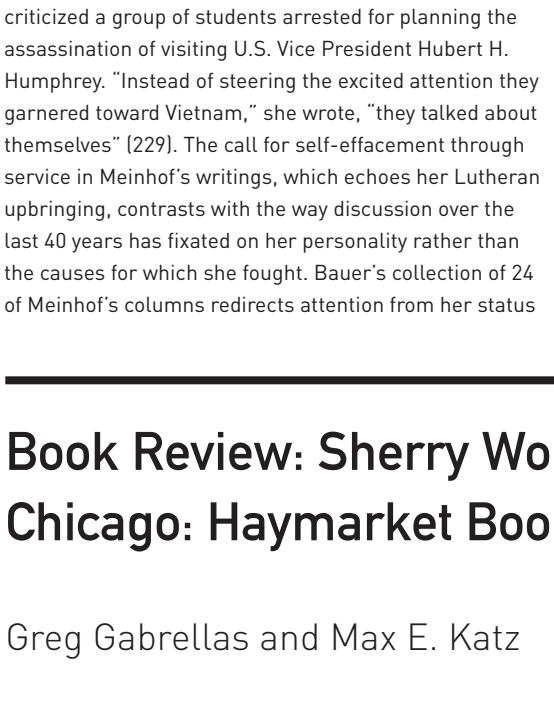
Book Review: Sherry Wolf, *Sexuality and Socialism: The History, Theory and Practice of LGBT Liberation*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009.

Greg Gabrellas and Max E. Katz



YOU ARE SEVENTEEN, you enjoy sex with members of your gender, and you have a growing interest in radical politics. What should you believe, what should you do? The socialist position seems practically indistinguishable from mainstream liberalism: support for same-sex marriage, hate crime laws, and a trans-inclusive Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). There seems to be a more radical option, however. Against the (allegedly) reformist, assimilationist, and legalistic orientation of actually existing gay politics, self-described "queers" demand a politics of radical sexual difference; a politics that seeks, somehow, to go *beyond* equality. What lies "beyond equality" turns out to be the expected juvenilia of anarchoid direct actions: dropping a banner declaring "It's Okay to be Gay" from the balcony of a megachurch, pouring glue in the locks of a Mormon temple, vandalizing the headquarters of the mainstream Human Rights Campaign (HRC). After the last incident, the perpetrators released a statement claiming that, "Just like society today, the HRC is run by a few wealthy elites who are in bed with corporate sponsors who proliferate militarism, heteronormativity, and capitalist exploitation."[1] This certainly *appears* more radical than beltway lobbying by "wealthy elites" on bedroom terms with "corporate sponsors" and the Democratic Party. Staid liberalism or hysterical vandalism: These seem to be the available politics.

Sherry Wolf's recent volume, *Sexuality and Socialism: The History, Theory and Practice of LGBT Liberation*, seeks to clarify the situation. Wolf proposes to use a "Marxist worldview to examine… historical, political, and theoretical questions of sexual and gender oppression in order to frame an argument for how we can organize for LGBT liberation" (9). Marxism, she suggests, can offer activists much needed theoretical artillery to fashion a coherent opposition against sexual and gender oppression. To young activists, however, the proposition may seem unlikely. Don't the reactionary policies of Stalinism—namely criminalization of homosexuality, prohibition of abortion, and restriction of divorce—indicate a Puritanism at the heart of Marxist politics? The good Stakhanovite has no time for the listless, bourgeois decadence of Uranian pleasure.

Wolf effectively vindicates the Marxist tradition's concern with sexual freedom, demolishing what she calls the "myth of Marxist homophobia." To prove that Marxism "privileges" class only to ignore the struggle against sexual oppression, opponents have long trotted out a private letter to Karl Marx wherein Friedrich Engels makes an allegedly homophobic slur against the Lassallean Jean Baptisa von Schweitzer. Wolf ably sweeps away the slander, situating the letter within the internecine struggles of the Left. More convincing, though, is an extraordinary excerpt Wolf cites from Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and The State*:

> What we can now conjecture about the way in which sexual relations will be ordered after the impending overthrow of capitalist production is mainly of negative character, limited for the most part to what will disappear. But what will there be new? That will be answered when a new generation has grown up: a generation of men who never in their lives have known what it is to buy a woman's surrender with money or any other social instrument of power; a generation of women who have never known what it is to give themselves to a man from any other considerations than real love or to refuse to give themselves to their lover from fear of the economic consequences. When these people are in the world, they will care precious little what anybody today thinks they ought to do; they will make their own practice and their corresponding public opinion of their practice of each individual—and that will be the end of it. (Qtd. 82–83)

Although this, and this alone, gives the lie to the tedious myth of Marxist Puritanism, Wolf also explains how the young Soviet regime eliminated anti-sodomy and age of consent laws, decriminalized prostitution, and sought to combat sexually transmitted diseases. The reader will learn that the Soviet Red Army was rife with lesbians, some of them cross-dressing. Freed from Chillingworthian caricature, Wolf sketches a Lenin deeply concerned with sexual emancipation, writing to his mistress, Inessa Armand, that the revolution would emancipate love from "the constraints of religious prejudice, patriarchal and social strictures, the law, police and courts" (qtd. 93).

Wolf has cleared the residual anti-Marxist earwax away: You are ready to listen and learn what Marxism helps us understand about sexual freedom. Wolf's answer runs, more or less, like this: For the vast majority of the species throughout the greater part of human history, sustenance came direct from the land. What Marx called the "primitive accumulation of capital"—the start of capitalism—broke the bond. Enclosure by enclosure, the species was cut loose from the land and thrown into the labor market, free to seek out its own living. Of course, this was (and continues to be) the freedom to starve, suffer, and die. But capitalism also opens the possibility of sexual autonomy. Freed from the moral template of traditional life, men and women could begin to conceive, fashion, and pursue their own desires, pleasures, and attachments. But the full promise of sex under capitalism could not be delivered. Capital generates intense instability, and instability provokes reaction. Via shame, criminalization, terror, and legislation, moralizers seek to re-impose solidity. Ultimately, though, the limits to sexual freedom come from the social form of capitalism itself. Try as you like to shape your own eros, the demands of wage labor—what Oscar Wilde, in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," called the "peremptory, unreasonable, degrading Tyranny of want"—saps away time and energy, thereby stifling the possibilities of pleasure and expression.

To be deeply interested in sexual freedom, Wolf's argument suggests, means recognizing the necessity of overcoming capitalism. For our hypothetical activist, this is an intriguing point, but a cryptic one. What would it even mean to be a Marxist today? How would one go about attempting to "overcome" capitalism today, and how could this connect up to the specific struggles for sexual liberation? But as Wolf considers recent history and contemporary practice, an unrecognized disconnect emerges between the Marxist theory she outlines and the actual politics she advocates.

As Wolf ought to emphasize, sexual liberation movements, whether feminist or gay, have systematically failed to effectively advocate for the international overthrow of capitalism. Even in the putatively "radical" moment of the 1970s, when gay liberationists thought of themselves as explicitly revolutionary, revolution meant little more than endorsement of the Stalinist-inflected "anti-imperialism" of the New Left. Instead of reckoning with the politics of gay liberation, Wolf chooses to celebrate the movement's extremely limited contributions to the broadening of sexual freedom. For Wolf, gay liberation develops as an understandable reaction to the oppression of sexual minorities. This is a common and easy way to think about the so-called "new social movements" that began in the 1960s. The pressure was rising; release had to come. But such a "hydraulic" conception of political mobilization misses the constitutive importance of ideology. Gay liberation was not a knee-jerk response-formation; it was authorized and formed by the then-dominant form of Marxist theory. Inflected by Maoism and influenced by the struggles for Third World liberation, so-called "Marxist-Leninism" came to think of revolutionary politics as, fundamentally, the struggle of the oppressed against oppressor. As a result, a concern with overcoming capitalism internationally became replaced by support for "people's liberation" movements abroad and at home.

Informed by such theory, many in the gay liberation movement supported Castro's Cuba and the Black Panther Party, despite their reactionary politics regarding sexuality. Unable or unwilling to recognize the disconnect between the promise of Marxist theory and the depressing actualities of "gay liberation," Wolf blithely asserts that the movement was "drawing revolutionary conclusions, connecting issues, and presenting liberation as something that was not possible without the overthrow of capitalism" (137).

Wolf's immediate political suggestions demonstrate the same dishonesty in acute form. The book suggests that winning contemporary debates around sexuality will, somehow, lead towards revolution. Such magical thinking is symptomatic of the wider Marxist left. Unable to recognize their complete political impotency, "revolutionaries" whorishly tail after whatever seems to be moving: a couple of years ago it was the Democratic Party, but now it is the Green Party, immigration reform, and gay rights. This is the political equivalent of a middle-aged man, pot-bellied and combed-over, desperately trying to pick up fresh young flesh. Worse than pathetic, this is betrayal. Wolf has interested our hypothetical young self (and many young selves like it) in revolutionary politics, and pimped out their interest in wholly symbolic politics. The support of Wolf's International Socialist Organization (ISO) will not, one must admit, make a difference in the fight to attain same-sex marriage. This is not to say that the political defense of marriage equality is, in itself, wrong or misguided. But such false optimism obscures recognition of the real problem: the gaping disconnect between Marxist theory and allegedly "Marxist' politics.

The evasion is made clearest in Wolf's criticism of identity politics. She points out (correctly) that proponents of "ID politics" misappropriate tropes from postmodern theory in order to valorize their own perpetual

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