The politics of Critical Theory

Chris Cutrone, Martin Suchanek, and Haziran Zeller

On February 17, 2017, as part of its Third European Conference, the Platypus Affiliated Society organized a panel, "The Politics of Critical Theory." Held at the University of Vienna, the event brought together the following speakers: Chris Cutrone, President of the Platypus Affiliated Society; Martin Suchanek of Workers Power, an international organization fighting to build a Fifth International; and Haziran Zeller of Humboldt University, in Berlin. What follows is an edited transcript of their discussion.

Panel description

In 2010, the *New Left Review* published a translated conversation between Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In the course of their conversation, Adorno comments that he had always wanted to "develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin, while keeping up with culture at its most advanced." Adorno, it seems, was a Leninist. As surprising as this evidence might have been to some, is it not more shocking that Adorno's politics, and the politics of Critical Theory, have remained taboo for so long? Was it really necessary to wait until Adorno and Horkheimer admitted their politics in print to understand that their primary preoccupation was with maintaining Marxism's relation to bourgeois critical philosophy (Kant and Hegel)? This panel proposes to state the question directly: How did the practice and theory of Marxism, from Marx to Lenin, make possible and necessary the politics of Critical Theory?

Opening remarks

Chris Cutrone: I am going to be presenting on Adorno's Leninism. The political origins of Frankfurt School Critical Theory have remained opaque for several reasons, not least the taciturn character of the major writings of its figures. The motivation for such reticence on the part of these theorists is itself what requires explanation—why they engaged in self-censorship and the encryption of their ideas, and consigned themselves to writing "messages in a bottle" without immediate or definite addressees. As Horkheimer put it, the danger was in speaking like an oracle. He asked simply: To whom shall we say these things? It was not simply due to American exile in the Nazi era or to post-World War II Cold War exigency. Some of their ideas were expressed explicitly enough. Rather, the collapse of the Marxist Left in which the Critical Theorists' thought had been formed, in the wake of the October 1917 revolution in Russia and the German Revolution and civil war of 1918–1919, deeply affected their perspectives on political possibilities in their historical moment. In what way was this Marxism?

The series of conversations between Horkheimer and Adorno in 1956, at the height of the Cold War, provide insight into their thinking and how they understood their situation in the trajectory of Marxism since the early 20th century. The transcript was published in 2010, in English translation, under the title "Towards a New Manifesto?"[1] The German publication of the transcript, in Horkheimer's collected works, is under the title "Discussion about Theory and Praxis." Their discussion was indeed in consideration of rewriting *The Communist Manifesto* in light of intervening history. Within a few years of this, Adorno began, but abandoned, work on a critique of the German Social Democratic Party's Godesberg Programme, which officially renounced Marxism in 1959. This deserted project was modeled on Marx's celebrated *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, which ruthlessly criticized the founding document of the SPD in 1875. So especially Adorno, but also Horkheimer, had been deeply concerned with the question of continuing the project of Marxism well after World War II. In the series of conversations between them, Adorno expressed his interest in rewriting the Communist Manifesto along what he called "strictly Leninist" lines. To which Horkheimer did not object, but only pointed out that such a document, calling for the "re-establishment of a socialist party," "could not appear in Russia, while in the United States and Germany it would be worthless."[2] Nonetheless, Horkheimer felt it was necessary to show "why one can be a communist and yet despise the Russians." As Horkheimer put it, simply: "Theory is, as it were, one of humanity's tools." Thus they tasked themselves with trying to continue Marxism, if only as theory.

Supposedly, it is precisely the turn away from political practice and retreat into theory that many commentators have characterized as the Frankfurt School's abandonment of Marxism. For instance, Martin Jay, in *The Dialectical Imagination*, or Phil Slater, in his book offering a Marxist interpretation of the Frankfurt School, characterized matters in such terms: Marxism could not be supposed to exist as mere theory, but had to be tied to practice. But this was not a problem new to the Frankfurt School in exile. Rather, it pointed back to what Karl Korsch, a foundational figure for the Institute, wrote in 1923 regarding the crisis of Marxism. The problems that had already manifested in the era of the Second International in the late-19th century, with the so-called Revisionist Dispute, and that culminated in the collapse and division of the International in World War I and the revolutions that followed, meant that "the umbilical cord" between theory and practice had been "broken."[3] Marxism needed transformation, in both theory and practice, but this transformation could only happen as a function not only of practice, but also of theory. They suffered the same fate.

For Korsch in 1923, as well as for Georg Lukács in the same period, in writings seminal for the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg were exemplary of the attempt to re-articulate Marxist theory and practice. Lenin in particular—as Lukács characterized him, "the theoretician of practice"—provided a key, indeed the crucial figure, in political action and self-understanding, of the problem Marxism faced at that historical moment. As Adorno put it to Horkheimer, "It could be said that Marx and Hegel taught that there were no ideals in the abstract, but that the ideal always lies in the next step, that the entire thing cannot be grasped directly, but only indirectly by means of the next step." Lukács had mentioned this about Lenin, in a footnote to his 1923 essay in History and Class Consciousness on "Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat":

> Lenin's achievement is that he rediscovered this side of Marxism, that points the way to an understanding of its practical core. His constantly reiterated warning to seize the next link in the chain with all one's might, that link on which the fate of the totality depends in that one moment, his dismissal of all utopian demands, *i.e.* his "relativism" and his "*Realpolitik*": All these things are nothing less than the practical realization of the young Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach."[4]

Thirty years later Horkheimer and Adorno's conversation in 1956, translated as "Towards a New Manifesto," took place in the aftermath of the Khrushchev speech denouncing Stalin. This event signaled a possible political opening, not in the Soviet Union so much as for the international Left. Horkheimer and Adorno recognized the potential of the Communist parties in France and Italy in particular, and in this they paralleled Marcuse's estimation in his "33 Theses," written in early 1947:

> The development [of history since Marx] has confirmed the correctness of the Leninist conception of the vanguard party as the subject of the revolution. It is true that the Communist parties of today are not this subject, but it is just as true that only they can become it. . . . The political task then would consist in reconstructing revolutionary theory within the Communist parties and working for a praxis appropriate to it. The task seems impossible today. But perhaps the relative independence from Soviet dictates, which this task demands, is present as a possibility in Western Europe's . . . Communist parties.[5]

Horkheimer and Adorno's conversation in "Towards a New Manifesto" was part of a greater crisis of Communism—the uprising in Hungary, the emergence of the post-colonial Non-Aligned Movement, the split between the USSR and Communist China—that gave rise to the New Left in the 1960s. Verso's title for their publication of the Horkheimer–Adorno conversation was not misleading. This was the time of the founding of the *New Left Review*, to which C. Wright Mills wrote his famous "Letter to the New Left," calling for greater attention to the role of intellectuals in social and political transformation. As Adorno put the matter, "I have always wanted to develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin." Horkheimer responded laconically: "Who would not subscribe to that?" It is necessary to understand what such statements took for granted.

The emphasis on Marxism as an account of exploitation, rather than of social-historical domination, is mistaken. Marx called capital the domination of society by an alienated historical dynamic of value-production: money, commodities, more money, or M–C–M′. At stake here is the proletarianization of bourgeois society after the Industrial Revolution, or, as Lukács put it in *History and Class Consciousness*, how "the fate of the workers becomes that of society as a whole."[6] This went back to Marx and Engels in the 1840s. Engels had written a precursor to the *Communist Manifesto*, a credo from 1847, in which he pointed out that the proletariat, the working class after the Industrial Revolution, was unlike any other exploited group in history, in both its social being and consciousness. The danger was that the working class would mistake their post-Industrial Revolution condition for that of pre-industrial bourgeois society, with its ethos of work. As the Abbé Sieyès had put it, in his 1789 revolutionary pamphlet "What is the Third Estate?," while the Church's First Estate with its property of communion with divinity prays, and the aristocratic Second Estate with its property of honor in noble chivalry fights, the commoner Third Estate works, with no property other than that of labor. Bourgeois society resulted from the revolt of the Third Estate. But the separate classes of increasing numbers of workers and ever fewer capitalists were the products of the division of bourgeois society in the Industrial Revolution,

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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.

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over the value of the property of labor, between wages and capital. This was, according to Marx, the crisis of bourgeois society in capital, which has been recurrent since the 1840s.

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

Adorno's affirmation of Lenin on subjectivity was driven by his account of the deepening problems of capitalism in the 20th century, in which the historical development of the workers' movement was bound up. Adorno did not think that the workers were no longer exploited. In "Reflections on Class Theory" (1942), Adorno pointed out that Marx and Engels' assertion that the entire history of civilization was one of class struggles was actually a critique of history as a whole. That the dialectic of history in capital was one of un-freedom, and only the complete dehumanization of labor was potentially its opposite, the liberation from work. Adorno's "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" points out that the workers were not being paid a share of the economic value of their labor, which as Marx had recognized was infinitesimal in post-Industrial Revolution capitalism. Rather, echoing Lenin, Adorno states that their wages were merely a cut of the profits of capital, granted to them for political reasons to prevent revolution. This was an index of the involvement of the working class in monopoly capital and bureaucratic state racketeering; the ramifications of this process were addressed by the split in the socialist workers' movement, and indeed within Marxism itself, that Lenin represented.

The crisis of Marxism was grasped by the Frankfurt School in its formative moment of the 1920s. In "The Little Man and the Philosophy of Freedom," Horkheimer explained, "[T]he present lack of freedom does not apply equally to all. An element of freedom exists when the product is consonant with the interest of the producer. All those who work and even those who don't, have a share in the creation of contemporary reality."[7] This followed Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, which prominently quoted Marx and Engels from *The Holy Family* in 1845, as follows: "The property-owning class and the class of the proletariat represent the same human self-alienation. But the former feels at home in this alienation and feels itself confirmed by it; it recognizes alienation as its own instrument and in it possesses the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels itself destroyed by this alienation and sees in it its own impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence."[8]

The necessary corrective for this, though, was not the feeling of this oppression, but rather the theoretical and practical consciousness of the historical potential for the transformation of bourgeois social relations at a global scale—"Workers of the world, unite!" According to Marx, this could only take place through the growth and greater accumulated historical self-awareness of the workers' movement for socialism. But the growth of the workers' movement had resulted in the crisis of socialism, its division into revolutionary Communism and reformist Social Democracy in WWI, and the revolutions that followed. Reformist Social Democracy had succumbed to the reification of bourgeois ideology in seeking to preserve the workers' interests, and had become the counter-revolutionary bulwark of continued capitalism in the post-WWI world. There was a civil war within Marxism. The question was the revolutionary necessity and possibility of communism that Lenin expressed in the Russian Revolution, which was meant to be the beginning of global revolution. Similarly, for the Frankfurt School, the Stalinism that developed in the wake of failed *world* revolution was, contrary to Lenin, the reification of Marxism itself, which had become a barbarized bourgeois ideology—the affirmation of work, rather than its dialectical *Aufhebung*, its negation and transcendence through fulfillment and completion.

To put it in Lenin's terms, there are two dialectically interrelated, potentially contradictory levels of consciousness: the workers' trade union consciousness, which remains within the horizon of capitalism, and their class consciousness, which reveals the world-historical potential beyond capitalism. The latter, the Hegelian critical self-recognition of the workers' class struggle, was the substance of Marxism—the critique of communism as the real movement of history. As Marx put it in his 1843 letter to Ruge, communism is "a dogmatic abstraction . . . infected by its antithesis," private property. And, in his 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx stated unequivocally that "Communism is the position of the negation of the negation, and is hence the actual phase necessary for the next stage of historical development in the process of human emancipation and rehabilitation. Communism is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism as such is not the goal of human development, not the form of human society."[9]

For Marx, communism demanded an immanent critique, according to its dialectical contradictions, heightened to an adequate self-awareness. The issue is the potential for the abolition of wage-labor by the wage-laborers, the overcoming of the social principle of work by the workers. Marx's Hegelian question was, how had history made this possible, in theory and practice? While Adorno and Horkheimer's historical moment was not the same as Marx's or Lenin's, this does not mean that they abandoned Marxism, but rather that Marxism, in its degeneration, had abandoned them. The experience of communism in the 1930s was the purge of intellectuals. So the question was the potential continued critical role of theory—how to follow Lenin? In "Imaginative Excesses," part of *Minima Moralia* that was taken out of the published version, Adorno argued that the workers "no longer mistrust intellectuals because they betray the revolution, but because they might want it, and thereby reveal how great is their own need of intellectuals."[10]

Adorno and Horkheimer are thus potentially helpful for recovering the true spirit of Marxism. Their work expresses what has become obscure or esoteric about Marxism. This invites a blaming of their work, holding them culpable, instead of recognizing the unfolding of history they described. It was this history, not the Frankfurt School, that had made Marxism esoteric and potentially irrelevant—a message in a bottle, that they hoped could still yet be received. It is unfortunate if their work is not.

Martin Suchanek: I want to deal with three major points in my contribution to the debate. I think Chris made a case for continuity between the Frankfurt School, particularly Adorno, and Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky. Nevertheless, having been an adherent of the Frankfurt School before I became a Marxist, I think such continuity does not exist in their writings. I will deal with the text circulated beforehand, the discussion between Horkheimer and Adorno that Chris has already referenced. Then, I will discuss the real points of departure of the Frankfurt School from Marx in particular, and where I think Marx is right and they are wrong. Finally, I will address what I think should be the objectives of revolutionaries, particularly where they should break with the method of the Frankfurt School.

If you look at the *Communist Manifesto*, which is taken as an example here, it includes a number of tasks which the working class movement has to undertake in the next historical period. As with every program and manifesto, these tasks are historically specific. The *Communist Manifesto* is not a general statement on capitalism. It attempts to guide political action. You can say the same thing about programs from the Bolsheviks and Lenin. The fact that Horkheimer and Adorno refuse to provide such direction is extremely important. It represents a break with, not a continuation of, Marxism. This refusal is internal to the Frankfurt School and its development. To put it quite strongly, I think you can either be a Marxist, *or* a supporter of the Frankfurt School.

How Horkheimer and Adorno conceptualize the Enlightenment departs from the typical Marxian understanding. This is related to how the laws of motion and development of class societies, and of bourgeois society in particular, are conceptualized. For Adorno, the historical driving force is not the class struggle but, actually, an increasing domination of people, of mankind, in the development of society.

A second and related point to raise is Adorno's interpretation in "Reflections on Class Theory." Adorno does not simply follow Lenin's point about the "labor aristocracy" as a problem of working class organization and the question of relative social-political stability. There is a significant difference between Lenin and Adorno here. Following Friedrich Pollock's analysis of fascism, Adorno holds that capitalism in the 20th century developed into an "organized society." This is a society in which the inner contradictions of capital, the necessity of crisis, could be managed. In such a society, the unfolding of the economic crisis can be avoided. The tendency of the rate of profit to fall can be offset, while other related phenomena are stabilized by the state, which manages the political relation between classes. According to this theory, the working class and the capitalist class are integrated into a totalitarian state.

Pollock was the one who advanced this theory of totalitarianism, but Adorno and Horkheimer follow it as well. Such a theory is actually at odds with historical development. The period in which we live disproves it. Moreover, this theory leads to the conclusion that the socialist revolution is not a necessity developing out of the inner contradiction of capitalism. Revolution is, at best, reduced to a voluntarist act. This theory thus departs from the scientific foundations of Marxism. Accordingly, the question of the party, of the manifesto, of the program, becomes a theme that they play around with. They merely speculate. One can see this very clearly in the text of "Towards a New Manifesto?" Maybe we need a party—but, you know, it will end badly. Maybe we need a manifesto—but who would even read it? The Frankfurt School cannot identify a revolutionary subject for their theory; in this sense, they depart profoundly from Marx and Lenin. Horkheimer and Adorno's idea, which is now commonplace on the Left, is that Marx has a great *method*, but the results of Marx's approach are dubious. Upon reading *Das Kapital*, people often conclude, "Yes, great book. Wonderful crisis. We like the chapter on fetishism, but not the ideas about the tendency of the rate of profit to fall"—the most important law that Marx develops! It is a problem for such people to say, "But I am still a Marxist! I like Marx's method, I just do not agree that you need to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat." Of course, non-Marxists can learn from Marx; however, if you *are* a Marxist—or a Leninist, or revolutionary—then you cannot accept the method, while rejecting the political conclusions to which that method necessarily leads.

If you want to re-establish revolutionary Marxism, you must do more than develop a critique or a negative position. One must also work out what the working class needs to fight for, positively, in the here and now. It is not enough to say, "It seems we cannot have revolution now, but perhaps there will come a time." This is a passive standpoint. Here I think there is continuity between the Frankfurt School and the Second International, but not with Marx or Lenin. The Second International had a kind of passive optimism: "One fine day, we will have socialism. The "Big *Kladderadatsch*" will come, and we will take over, because the bourgeoisie just won't know what to do any more." For the Frankfurt School, this goes in the other direction. "Whatever we do, it may all end up badly. If we say something positive, we might get it wrong. Our thought might be reified. We should not develop it." This is not a solution. One has to go back, in a sense, to the original thinking of Marx and Lenin on this score.

I was attracted to the Frankfurt School because of its negativity. However, for developing revolutionary politics, this is not enough. Many of the contradictions that developed before and during World War I, which also presented the actuality of revolution, seem to be replaying here and now. And I am not just saying that because this year marks the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Unlike 100 years ago, we also see that the contemporary crisis of the Left, which I would prefer to call the crisis of working class leadership, or the crisis of the communist movement, or simply, the lack of any genuine revolutionary organizations, means that the right ends up taking the initiative. It is not enough merely to criticize different strands of the Left. We ourselves have to develop a program and a politics that provide an answer. Then, I think, we shall come to a situation in which the rebirth of Marxism and Leninism is not only possible, but also necessary.

Haziran Zeller: My text is called "Lenin's Adornianism." It is redundant to ask, "Was Critical Theory political?" Every sentence of Critical Theory is political. The real question is whether or not Critical Theory is revolutionary. Is it on the side of those fighting against this society? Can thinking be revolutionary at all? We are looking for the value of revolution in theory. We are also looking for the revolutionary content of theory. Is Hegel a revolutionary because of his dialectical method? Considering the politics of Critical Theory poses the question of how we relate theory and practice.

The relation of theory and practice can be posed in at least three different ways. First, one can ask about the justification of practice, or about the reasons for abandoning the world as it exists. Second, one can ask about the aim of practice, or the principles of a future world. Third, one can ask for the next step, which is Lenin's practical question: "What is to be done?" In the interest of time, and because I assume that we largely agree as to the first two questions, I will not elaborate on them further, and will instead focus on the third. However, a few preliminary remarks are necessary before we can deal with Lenin's question.

Society lets people starve even though starvation is, from a technological point of view, no longer necessary. From this fact alone we can deduce our first aim: organizing society such that nobody starves. This appears simple but, to paraphrase Brecht, communism is a simple thing that's monstrously difficult to achieve. We have a point of departure, point A, and a destination, point B, but between them is an enormous chasm. That chasm is practice. Communism is in theory—that is to say, "logically"—accessible from point A. Why is it so difficult, then, to find a path from A to B? For the historical materialist, this chasm has to do with the productive forces of society. The more that the productive forces develop, the more the gap shrinks between the existing world of shortage and a future world of *luxus*. The more pressure that develops within capitalist society, the more likely it is that the social relations appear as the obstacles to production that they objectively are.

Horkheimer and Adorno have a particular, critical interpretation of the term "productive forces" following from their fundamental insight that theory and practice cannot be distinguished selectively. "Productive forces" mean, on the one hand, the machine in the factory, and, on the other hand, the human mental capacities that have constructed the machine and that operate it. Following this, the historical-materialist theory of revolution is traditionally presented in two ways. On the one hand, objectively, social relations become more progressive, because less work is needed to be done. Capitalism at some point admits its own needlessness, perhaps through the detour of a revolutionary proletariat that digs its grave. Or, the same story is told subjectively, according to which proletarian consciousness climbs an ever-higher ladder, parallel to the development of the productive forces and the quantitative increase of mental capacities, and creates at some point a leap ahead, a qualitative change, in which social relations are revolutionized: a new man is born; it is the dawn of a revolutionary class. Both explanations hold that the productive forces eventually break through the social relations of production, either in an objective manner determined by economics, or in a subjective manner determined by politics.

Horkheimer and Adorno distrust this narrative; their distrust is not a departure from Leninism but is, in fact, what makes them Leninists. They reject the idea that the productive forces break through social relations in a mechanistically objective manner. Revolution is not a natural phenomenon; it is not a lunar eclipse. Greater economic development does not necessarily lead to a revolution in social relations, but only to an increase in the mastery of nature. Horkheimer and Adorno also reject the subjective aspect of the traditional historical-materialist theory. Here they follow Lenin's thesis that the worker *as such* only arrives at a trade-unionist, reformist consciousness. Adorno argues,

> Marx was too harmless; he probably imagined quite naïvely that human beings are basically the same in all essentials and will remain so. It would be a good idea, therefore, to deprive them of their second nature. He was not concerned with their subjectivity; he probably didn't look into that too closely. The idea that human beings are the products of society down to their innermost core is an idea that he would have rejected as a milieu theory. Lenin was the first person to assert this.[11]

Lars Quadfasel wrote an article about Adorno's Leninism that I highly recommend, in which he points out that Adorno in this quote might have overestimated Lenin and underestimated Marx.[12] For the purposes of our argument today, however, we can put that aside. What's important is why Adorno believed himself to be in unity with Lenin. Adorno was convinced, as was Lenin, that the line from capitalism to communism is not actually a line at all, but a *point*.

To the pragmatic question of what is to be done, the real Leninist, in opposition to the reformist, answers, "Nothing needs to be done!" The reformist believes that, on the way to communism, fewer and fewer people will sleep under bridges. He believes that a quantitative increase in the individual conditions of life, more consumer goods and fewer hours worked, will at some point lead to a qualitative leap into communism. The Leninist knows there is no need for this gradualism. We could easily access this state in one single blow. Regarding the earlier problem, for instance, IKEA just needs to make as many beds as there are homeless people. Reformist thought is as superfluous as capital. To put it in a different way: Reformist thought does not want to think the totality. It ignores the network of needs and available goods that *already exists*. In a certain sense, the needs of the homeless can be satisfied already, but this possibility is not realized. There is no being-for-itself of this being-in-itself. From a philosophical point of view, it would seem that there is no need for the politics of the next step.

The Leninist knows that the social totality merges in one point: the state. Lenin understood that the state is the singular place to unravel the existing society. When, in the second half of the year 1917, the objective and not only abstract possibility existed to overtake the state, it was necessary to choose the right moment. That was Lenin's art of insurrection. Revolution is not a line, but a point in space-time: The right people, at the right place, at the right time. Because the world is, in and of itself, fundamentally wrong, everything has to be changed, in order to change it even a little bit. Horkheimer and Adorno put it like this: "With practice we mean to take the thought seriously that the world has to change from scratch."[13] Philosophically that entails a radical *skepsis* that distrusts every single perception unless it has understood the system of perception. But there is a point where *skepsis* comes to a halt. The point that cannot be attacked by *skepsis*, because it is necessary in *skepsis* itself, is the Ego of the skeptic: Kant's "I think," which has to accompany all of one's conceptions. The "I think" of society is the state. To have discovered that is Lenin's great merit. The bourgeois state has to be destroyed in order to erect the classless society on its ruins. Lenin's positive skepticism, which is neither cynical nor completely negative, is his philosophical method.

The major problem for Adorno and Horkheimer was that Lenin remained valid, but only as theory. Practically, there was no labor movement, because there was no party that could direct the workers' spontaneity to the point of totality, which is the state. For that reason, the philosophers who might have directed the party were also superfluous. Additionally, for the superfluous philosophers of the non-existing party of the non-existing movement, there was no revolutionary situation. There were no correct moments or places for revolution. Horkheimer and Adorno put it this way: "In Marx's day it could not yet be seen that the immanence of society had become total. That means, on the one hand, that one might almost need to do no more than strip off the outer shell; on the other hand, no one really wants things to be otherwise."[14] The line A–B has always been a point but, in the administered world, the denseness of this point has grown immense. Society becomes a black hole. In epistemological terms: Society is in one place described as the subject of synthesis, the "I think," the *Ich denke*, and in another place as the object of the synthesis, the thing-in-itself, the *Ding-an-sich*.

Thus, the question for Horkheimer and Adorno was, Is it still possible to be a Leninist? Their answer is radical: Critical Theory must bear the consequence of the non-existence of practice and, as such, reject compromise. There is no such thing as a practical practice. "Practice means today either reformism or quietism."[15] "The only thing, that speaks against it, is that we are still thinking today. In thought rests all remaining hope."[16] It is a miracle that there are still tendencies that resist social relations.

The survival of Leninism *as theory* looks like resignation, but it is necessary in order to ensure that the true content of revolution is not lost. It is the defense of Lenin on a deeper level that forbids Horkheimer and Adorno to put forth a simple declaration of solidarity with this or that political tendency. In Critical Theory, Lenin's revolutionary practice is concentrated. It is still necessary to find the point at which society can be unraveled. However, even if the last step of liberation will be a practical one, the politics necessary for taking the next step cannot resort to unthinking practice. In his "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," Adorno puts this as follows: "The dialectic is hopeless: that through praxis alone is it possible to escape the captivating spell praxis imposes on people, but that meanwhile as praxis it compulsively contributes to reinforcing the spell, obtuse, narrow-minded, at the farthest remove from spirit."[17]

We know that Horkheimer and Adorno are right. There is no revolutionary practice available to us; our political biographies are likely to prove that. Why else are we sitting here in a university discussing these questions theoretically? What about the pragmatic question, "What is to be done?" The only answer is to keep thinking. Although the practical questions remain, from a revolutionary point of view, they can only be answered by the insight that we must produce better theory. Presumably, that is why this conference has posed the question of the politics of Critical Theory. In Vienna, in 2017, this is the most revolutionary thing that exists.

Responses

CC: What does it mean to say that capitalism reproduces itself? From Marx's perspective, and I think this was the case for Lenin and remains so for the Frankfurt School, there is no such thing as capitalism, *per se*. Capitalism is nothing but the possibility of socialism. In itself, it is nothing. It is not a "system." Bourgeois society might have been something like a system. Bourgeois

"Politics" continues on page 4

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social relations, emerging out of the Renaissance over centuries, might have been some sort of social organization, but capitalism is social disorganization. It is social destruction. It is contradiction, but in its contradiction, points beyond itself.

The Frankfurt School's notion of "organized capitalism" (state capitalism, or administered capitalism) is liable to be misread. They were not offering anything new or different, but rather returning to Marx's point. Before the revolutions of 1848, Marx and Engels wrote the manifesto, in which context it seemed that communism was imminent. The results of 1848 led them to change their mind, really for the only time, due to the experience of the revolutions of 1848. Specifically, they sought to understand Bonapartism, which is when the state tries to do what the capitalists themselves cannot do, and what the workers seem not yet able to do. But organized capitalism, or state capitalism, or Bonapartist capitalism, another phase of which we are now living through, does not itself solve the problem of capitalism. It displaces the problem to another level and in fact heightens the contradiction. This was Rosa Luxemburg's point against Eduard Bernstein, who thought that capitalism was evolving into socialism. Luxemburg retorted that everything in capitalism that *appears* to be evolving towards socialism is actually the deepening of the contradiction of capitalism. Everything that might be mistaken for solving the problem of capitalism in reality exacerbates it.

In the present, the fact that theory and practice appear to be separated, torn asunder, is itself the problem that needs to be explained. In response to the criticism that the Frankfurt School separated theory and practice, it must be said that they themselves did not do this but, rather, they reflected upon the fact that theory and practice had come to be separated. Stalinism, official Communism, no longer aimed at what Lenin thought of as the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Theory and practice had been forcibly separated; in fact, a whole generation of intellectuals had to be killed off to enforce that separation. That is what the Frankfurt School generation survived. We have to view their skepticism toward practice in this context. In their specific conditions, namely the 1950s, any practice would immediately be swept along with the SPD or the Labour Party in the UK. They speculate that in France and Italy it might be different, but in Germany or in the UK, anything you do is going to be swept along. Speaking as an American, I can say that anything you do is going to be swept along in the Democratic Party, and that has been the case since the New Deal or, in other words, since the Frankfurt School's time, since the 1930s. They did not think this situation was either inevitable or permanent. Regarding what Martin said about the problem of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that they replaced class struggle with the domination of nature, they are addressing the Hegelian point of how history appears in the present. In other words, in Lenin's time, history looks like the history of class struggle, but that is a critique of all history. In the 1940s and 1950s, history looks, out of present practical exigency, not like class struggle pointing to socialism but, rather, like the domination of nature leading to a dead end. But that is itself a historically specific issue, which they strove to critique, not to affirm.

MS: I think Chris is trying to rescue Adorno from Adorno. With regard to a point that he just made, that Adorno's idea of organized capitalism regulating economic crisis was merely conjunctural, of course it is the case that Adorno could not foresee what happened after his death. However, this idea was wrong even at the time. It was never a correct assessment of capitalism. Adorno and Horkheimer did not believe that the proletariat can be recovered as the revolutionary subject. In terms of how they understood capitalism, including how they thought capitalism would evolve, they believed proletarian revolution to be impossible.

CC: There was something I meant to say earlier, regarding workers' organization and the movement for socialism. What Adorno and Horkheimer like about Lenin is actually what sets both him and Luxemburg apart from the rest of the Second International. Namely, they grasped that the workers' movement for socialism produces not only the potential for socialism, but also the potential for counter-revolution. The dialectic at play here is that building the political potential for socialism also builds the political potential for counter-revolution. These are inseparable. I do not think the Frankfurt School is saying, "We cannot build a party because it would just end in counter-revolution," because Lenin and Luxemburg had already grasped that this was always a possibility.

HZ: I want to answer Martin's argument that there is a rupture between Critical Theory and Marxism. What does it mean to be faithful to a theory? There is a tradition in philosophy of being faithful to and, at the same time, being critical of one's predecessors. Almost every theorem of Kant is negated by Hegel, but still Hegel understood himself to be *developing* the inner core of Kant. Hegel took the "I think" of Kant from the inner subject into the world, thus making Kant's whole theory more consistent. Marx had the same relationship to Hegel. Marx spent almost the first half of his life criticizing Hegel, but he did so in order to carry on and to fulfill Hegel's philosophical project. That's what is called *Aufhebung*, often translated as "sublation"—the simultaneous negation and fulfillment of a concept. That was the relationship of Adorno to Marx, and that should be the relationship of Marxists today to Adorno. We should try to preserve the inner core of his thinking. Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as Marcuse, were seeking for that inner kernel of Marx and trying to actualize it; we have to do that with Adorno and Horkheimer today.

Q&A

What would sustain the legacy, lessons, and the history of Marxist politics, in theory? I agree that the Frankfurt School did not think that revolution was always impossible, but rather that it might be impossible right now. The moment to realize the revolution has been missed. How does theory maintain the revolutionary legacy of the history of Marxist politics?

HZ: Aren't we maintaining it? You read the texts, you write your texts about the texts, and you talk with people, as we are doing. What is wrong with that? Maybe it is just that simple. Perhaps it is very easy to maintain the revolutionary ideas of Marx, Adorno, Lenin, and Luxemburg. We are here and we can at least keep it alive.

MS: One of the merits of the Frankfurt School is that they posed the question of why the proletarian revolution failed after WWI. That was, in a sense, their starting point. In answering that initial question they integrated the work of people like Lukács. This led them to investigate subjects that most Marxists did not deal with, such as psychoanalysis. However, if you are convinced that the working class cannot actually become a class for-itself, due to certain developments in capitalism and how it is organized, then you think that revolution is impossible. It is quite simple. That leaves you, at best, with a voluntarist notion of revolution: You have to impose revolution, despite its objective impossibility. In a sense, that would be the basis of the Frankfurt School's critique of those who were actually trying to build the party in the 1960s and '70s.

CC: I want to raise the question of "regression." The beginning of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* is essentially a confession of being in a disadvantageous position: Philosophy continues because the moment for realizing it, for abolishing it, had been missed. And, therefore, we are philosophers. Adorno thinks this is unfortunate. In other words, I think Adorno feels his own capacities as a critical theorist to be much less than what Marxism had achieved previously. The issue is not just about whether "point A to point B" is a line of progress or a crisis-point, but also, how acute or attenuated the necessity of socialism has become.

The problem of the 1960s generation is that they came up with new vanguards. The original idea was that the working class is the vanguard of the democratic revolution, and it needed a party of its own to advance its cause. Once you get rid of the idea of the working class as the vanguard of the democratic revolution and replace it with students as the new vanguard, women as the new vanguard, black people as the new vanguard, the Third World as the new vanguard, queers as the new vanguard, trans-people as the new vanguard, and so on, then you have liquidated the question of what is meant by the "vanguard" in the first place. This liquidates the original Marxist idea, which is the necessity of the task of socialism, into petty-bourgeois democracy. All the new vanguards are just the latest flavor of petty-bourgeois democracy.

The question for Adorno and Horkheimer, and even more so for us, is this: What if there is nothing left *but* petty-bourgeois democracy? What if the vanguard role of the working class has actually been liquidated in practice, and not only as a single event that occurred in the past, but as a situation that is maintained over time? What if the liquidation of the working class as the vanguard of the revolution is being actively maintained, as it once had been by Stalinism? When people say that the party substituted itself for the class, what they are saying is that Stalinism actively liquidated the working class as the vanguard of the revolution and institutionalized it. The trade unions in the West achieved similar outcomes on their own, ultimately. The Frankfurt School had a word for that: regression. So yes, of course, we are tasked with finding the potential in capitalism for socialism, but maybe our resources for doing so have regressed. We are poorer in our resources for such a project today than in Lenin's time. Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were honest enough to acknowledge that they were working with less. Today, we are working with even less than they were. **|P**

Transcribed by Daniel Lommes

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1 "Towards a New Manifesto?," *New Left Review* 65, Sept. – Oct. 2010. Available online at <http://platypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/horkheimeradorno_newmanifesto_NLR65_2010press.pdf >.
2 Ibid.
3 Korsch, "Marxism and Philosophy" (1923), available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-philosophy.htm>.
4 Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness*, endnote 60. Available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/index.htm>.
5 Marcuse, "33 Theses," trans. and titled by John Abromeit, paragraphs 32 and 33. Available online at <https://platypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/marcuse_33theses.pdf>.
6 Available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc05.htm>.
7 Horkheimer, "The Little Man and the Philosophy of Freedom," trans. Michael Shaw, in *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1969* (New York: Continuum Press, 1978), 51.
8 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc07_1.htm>.
9 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm>.
10 <https://platypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/readings/adorno_imaginativeexcesses.pdf>
11 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis" (1956), quoted in Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*, Harvard University Press, 2008, 233.
12 See Lars Quadfasel, "Adornos Leninismus: Kritische Theorie und das Problem der Avantgarde," available online at <http://jungle-world.com/artikel/2013/21/47771.html>.
13 Alternate translation in "Towards a New Manifesto?", op. cit., p. 53.
14 Ibid., p. 57.
15 Ibid., p. 52.
16 Ibid., p. 42.
17 Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 260.

Art, continued from page 2

the individual man, the totally developed individual for whom different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn. The only thing he cares about, and it's always a big deal, is individuality. It is an ethical critique.

JS: Or an immanent critique of liberalism?

JB: All I am emphasizing here is that the Marxian critique of capital is ethical. Of course, he thinks there are internal tensions in capital. But what he cares about, I think, is an ethical critique.

JS: In your recent article on the moral necessity of modernism, you argue that Marxist materialism was not materialist enough, owing to its optimistic Enlightenment rationalism. Can you elaborate on this vision of an alternative materialism and the minor politics, as you say, of resistance? In your view, should we abandon as obsolete Marx's notion of an immanent critique of capitalist social relations based on the contradiction between their pretensions to freedom and emancipation, and the practices that they shape?

JB: The second part of the question first: my hunch is that capital no longer has pretensions to freedom and emancipation. The turn to neoliberalism was designed to eliminate that pretension and that promise. Thatcher knew what she was about and the people around her knew it. Reagan did not know anything and the people around him did not know anything. Well, the economists did, they were Chicago School folks. But the people around Thatcher knew that we have to stop promising freedom and emancipation. We have to stop promising that society is going to deliver for you a better form of life. So what was Thatcher's thing? "Society does not exist." That was the end of the pretension, in my view. Her statement was not about freedom and emancipation; the market alone would be integral to any vision of freedom.

JS: So there is still an ideology of some sort?

JB: There is still an ideology of some sort, but an ideology based on the idea of not competing values, but on a thin conception of freedom. And the market as the only form of social organization compatible with this thin freedom. Neoliberalism believes in competition, with the attached thought that you undermine competition if you provide a safety net or imposed mechanisms of equalization. When you read Friedrich von Hayek, what he says is that any attempt to provide a form of equalization undoes the rule of law. For Hayek, even minimal regulation is just one step short of Stalinism. There is almost no gap between social regulation and outright totalitarian rule. Their notion of freedom is the freedom to be superfluous, the freedom to fail, and the freedom to lose. For them, unless that is there, then it is no freedom at all. So, sure, there is an ideology of freedom, but it is not integral to capital the way that it was in the original model, which was a vision of freedom, mainly free exchange in the marketplace, the freedom to lead your life, all of that, which felt like part of modernity itself; the right of subjectivity, as Hegel would call it, was embedded in the original capitalist idea, and it is just that that is dissolved by the neoliberal market.

So, the question that has to be asked is whether or not neoliberalism eats up even the notion of leading a life. In so far as you are an entrepreneur of yourself, if that is the fundamental category of subjectivity, then what it threatens is that, although the introduction of neoliberalism depends upon an ideology of freedom, its installation dissolves that basis into the sheer mechanisms of the market.

JS: But that is always the problem with any sort of ideology under capitalism, it undermines and fails to fulfill its own promise…

JB: No, I mean in the other direction. I mean neoliberalism undermines and cuts itself free from its grounding in freedom. If you read Foucault, in his hypnotic way, what he really thinks is that freedom is the wedge that allows neoliberal market rationality to appear, but once it appears, it can lose the original ballast of freedom, and just go for a wholly internally working system of market rationality. If any ideology appears internal to it, it is no more than an efflux of that internal rationality.

JS: If people continue to support and vote for neoliberal politicians and to support neoliberal policies, is this not an indication of the persistence of its promise as an ideology?

JB: I always think part of the answer that we always forget is we have lost the argument. That we have let the argument go, that the failures of the present are the failures of government, not capital.

What I mean is, the idea of immanent critique seems to me nicely powerful, but, politically speaking, is it the best form of critique? It seems to me that Sanders did as well as could be done in the contrast between government and the market in the campaign when he said "wait a minute, they keep telling you to trust the marketplace to deliver healthcare, and, really, are you going to trust Exxon Mobil?" And he went through all the cases where we actually distrust corporations, and he said "people always forget this, people always think social security is an entitlement, not a government program, because if they like it, it's not government. It is only government when they don't like it." Sanders, rhetorically, was not doing immanent critique, he was just offering a series of reminders—which can be immensely powerful: politics is often about forgetting and ignoring and sidelining.

JS: In *Towards a New Manifesto*, based on a recorded conversation between Horkheimer and Adorno in 1956, Adorno endorses Horkheimer's call "for the reestablishment of a socialist party," adding that it should have a "strictly Leninist manifesto."[4] Later in the conversation, Adorno remarks that it is his ambition to "develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels, and Lenin, while keeping up with culture, at its most advanced."[5] Do you find Adorno's explicit avowal of Marxism consistent with the model of Critical Theory you have inherited from him?

JB: Maybe you need to help me out with why you think that is a question. Your question is opaque to me. I have always thought of Adorno as an orthodox Marxist. I never thought of him as anything else. May be a better question is: Who else might be an orthodox Marxist?

I do think that Adorno was a terrible political thinker or non-thinker of the political, and this infects and harms his other work. I do not think, "oh, it's a shame he didn't write about politics." His inability to think politically shapes much of what he does. At the same time, of course, it is exactly this that allows him to put so much energy into the aesthetic sphere, where it can take on these tremendous resonances, but it is a deforming lack. And trying to think our way through political forms, non-instrumental forms of the political that are convergent with Marxism, is a challenge that has not yet been answered. That is, there is a great temptation on the Left to think of politics instrumentally, as a means of achieving socialism. Insofar as that is true, it is a repudiation of free self-determination, of what it means to live a human life.

JS: I take it your critique of Adorno's point here about reestablishing a socialist party is that it is instrumentalizing, that politics is turned into a vehicle for achieving socialism, to be discarded after the revolution?

JB: I do not think that necessarily. Again, the question of a socialist party seems to me a question of labels rather than goals. I am, of course, interested in any party that will put an end to the domination of capital, and which is compatible with free human self-determination. We have come to use the label of socialism to stand for this. And that is all it does, stand for non-exploitative social relations of production, distribution, and consumption. It is the commitment and the content that matter. I am not opposed to having various experiments on non-capitalist forms of social living that are regional. Can we have, a workers' cooperative garbage collection in New Haven? How would that work? That would be a beginning. So, again, I am in favor of a fluid, experimental, critical problem-solving way of engaging this, rather than with a fixed model and instrumentally thinking about how we can implement it. That is the version of politics that I thought we are trying to give up. So, blueprints… even the idea of where we are going has to continually be charged with immanent and critical content.

JS: Without something like a party, how can socialism be realized?

JB: I am all for political parties, but why just one that represents Socialism? Why not seven? I believe in political parties for exactly the reason that I believe in politics; parties are the bearers of political positions in a complex political world. The context of Adorno saying that is simply to make clear that, whatever Critical Theory is, it means to be a form of Marxism, it means to have Socialism as its goal, and probably, if it is going to realize that goal, it is going to require, he thinks, a vanguard party.

Of course, just to give the obvious examples, neither Habermas nor my friend Honneth would agree to those propositions, even in a shrunken form. They are liberal democrats with a bit of welfarism at the edges. Yet, they are not wobbly about those other commitments, those are powerful for them, but they have given up the question of property as the fundamental issue. In Gillian Rose's *Hegel Contra Sociology* she says Hegel, in outlining "the rose in the cross" of the present, is doing politics in the "severe style." The cross of the present is bourgeois property relations—private ownership over the means of production and all that; hence the rationality of the present can only be released, the right of subjectivity recognized through a transformation of existing property relations. Champions of the welfare state see the rose but not the cross.

JS: In light of the current political climate, what with the rejection of neoliberalism demonstrated by Trump's election, Brexit, and the popularity of a candidate like Bernie Sanders, do you think the Adorno we need is the Adorno that embraces socialism and a socialist party?

JB: Trump's election, although in part a critique of neoliberalism, represents anger at internationalism. For all of his defense of economic nationalism, nonetheless, all of the actual policies are de-regulating, favoring the rich, so, it is really just more of the same. It's an authoritarian, weird version of neoliberalism, contradictory in itself. It shows something of the failure of neoliberalism; but what is interesting to me, what the Left has not got a hold of at all, is that it is not just Trump or Brexit, it is everywhere in Europe. This is a North Atlantic civilization problem. There has been a return of authoritarianism and nationalism and this is perhaps even more urgent than the problem of socialism at the moment because it effects the location, formation, and direction of political action as such. What is the horizon of political will formation? How do we connect national politics with the international order? That we have got to think about answers to these questions in terms of what our overall political commitments are, including to socialism, is obvious. But this is a new phenomenon. And it is not going to pan out the way it did in the 1930s, that we can be sure of. This is a form of non-revolutionary authoritarianism, which means it wants to be able to go on and on and on. **|P**

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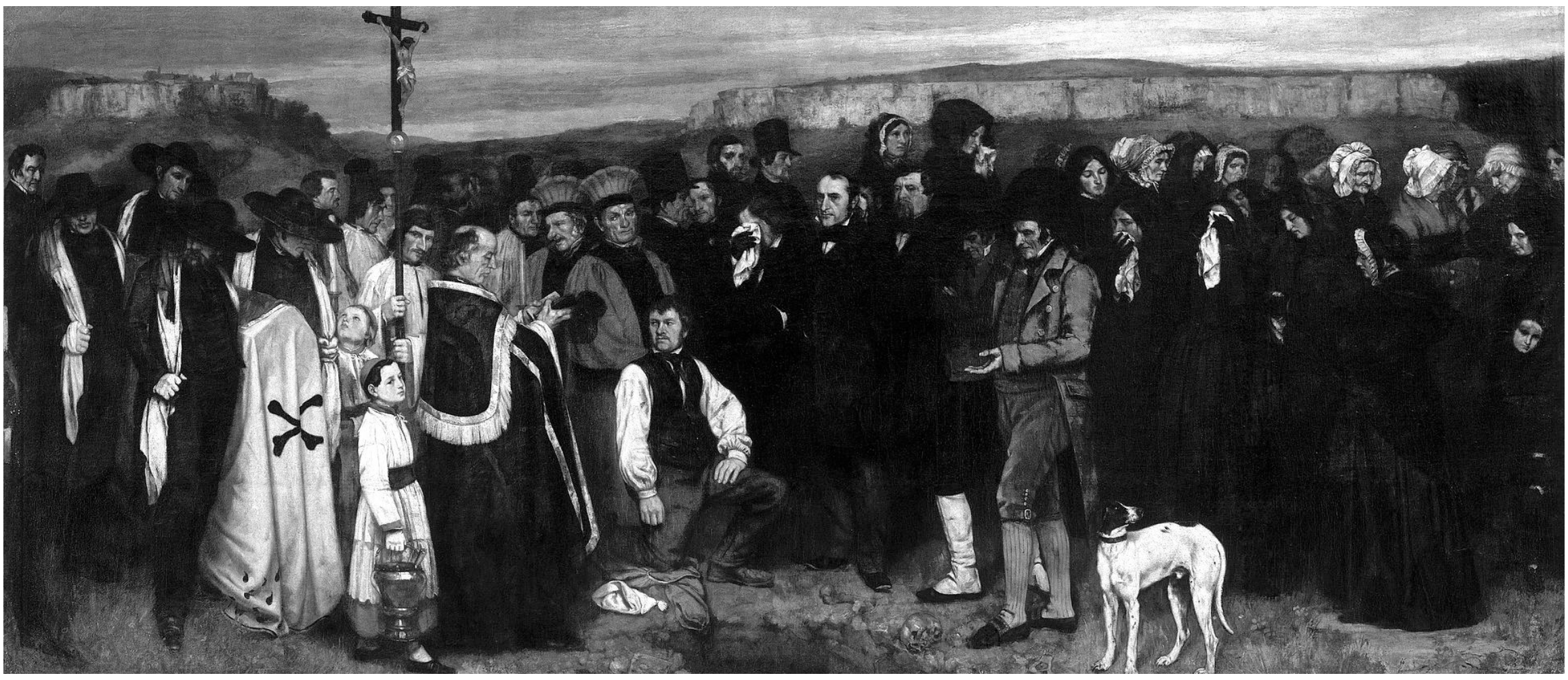
1 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1972), 55.
2 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 247.
3 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 617-618.
4 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto?" *New Left Review* 65 (2010): 55.
5 Ibid., 59.

Art and capital without contradiction? An interview with Jay Bernstein

Jensen Suther



Gustave Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans*, 1849-50.

On March 3, 2017, Jensen Suther interviewed Jay Bernstein, who teaches philosophy at the New School. Bernstein is the author of a number of books on art, ethics, and Critical Theory, which include The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno *(1992)*, Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics *(2006)*, Against Voluptuous Bodies: Adorno's Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting *(2007), and most recently,* Torture and Dignity: An Essay on Moral Injury *(2016). What follows is an edited version of the interview.*

Jensen Suther: You were a member of the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) in the sixties. Can you discuss your experience of the emergence of the New Left and the contexts of your own politicization? What role did Critical Theory play in that experience?

Jay Bernstein: Critical Theory played no role whatsoever in my political formation. I had been in high school, when, like everyone in my generation, I was taken by the Civil Rights Movement and, hence, politics. When I got to university, it was still about the Civil Rights Movement, as Vietnam had not yet become the dominant issue. But it really was Vietnam that politicized us. And as it happened, although we were just a few radicals on a college campus, we arranged one of the first anti-Vietnam rallies when Susan Sontag and Richard Wilbur came to speak to us at Trinity College. I do not have an answer as to why it was obvious to those of us there that this was deeply important to the country as a whole. Still we were certain: We were in a wrong war that was being wrongly fought.

And, if I want to say what politicized me most, or better, formed my political understanding, it was the Port Huron Statement. The Port Huron Statement laid out an account of the military industrial complex and an idea of participatory democracy. It put together a package of democratic self-control with a kind of Marxist critique. The Port Huron Statement was my beginning to be able to give political shape and context to what had been solely ethical objections. Sontag, when she gave that talk at Trinity, argued the problem with the Left in America was that it had been ethical and not political. And that transformation from the ethical to the political was what had already happened in the Civil Rights Movement. That is what Martin Luther King managed to find: a way of getting ethical content and political strategy into one package.

For me, the SDS was the breakthrough. I had read, which again seemed part of the moment, the *1844 Manuscripts*. The serious people, the serious socialists had already read *Das Kapital*. That did not happen for me until years later. The *1844 Manuscripts* were enough. With the Port Huron Statement, they gave me a vision of the modern world and a politics; that was the beginning. I was active in SDS; in 1968, I was arrested at Columbia; I was in jail with Tom Hayden; and I spent 1968 flying about from college campus to college campus trying to radicalize people on behalf of SDS, which was disastrous. Not because I was not a good political speaker, but because I would go to a college campus and the leftists would say to me "so what shall we revolt over?" The invasion of Cambodia kind of broke my heart. It felt like we had won the battle over Vietnam and, really, now you are going to invade Cambodia? That was at a moment when the Left, as a wider public political movement, had begun to shrink to the Weathermen and all that.

JS: You were close to the renowned Hegelian Gillian Rose in the seventies and wrote your first book on Georg Lukács's Marxist aesthetics. What first drew you to Lukács and Theodor Adorno, specifically, and to the Marxist tradition in general?

JB: I did my PhD in Edinburgh under W.H. Walsh on Kant's philosophy of science. I wanted to do a PhD on Hegel's *Phenomenology*, but he said "I only do Hegel's *Logic*," so we compromised on Kant's *Third Critique*. I met Gillian in 1976 at a conference at Oxford where David Wood was giving a Derridean critique of Hegel. I, in my fashion, gave my standard critique of Derrida and Deconstruction, and how he had got Hegel wrong. Gillian came up to me after the intervention and said to me, in her inimitable fashion, "you and I are going to be best friends." We were friends and colleagues joined at the hip by Hegel. She was my closest friend until her death.

My turn to aesthetics was in part contingent. When I got to the University of Essex, there was no philosophy major. Philosophy was a service department only and I was asked to teach a course on the philosophy of literature. I concocted a course; I do not remember it exactly, but both Lukács and Northrop Frye were in there. Lukács had caught my imagination as a graduate student, again, as a Hegelian Marxist. The thing about Lukács's thought that I found terribly moving and right and powerful was his image of revolution. Lukács rejected Marx's philosophy of history on the grounds that, prior to capitalism, class interests were never fully articulated, were never dominant, and were always "inextricably joined to political and religious factors"—that is from the "Class Consciousness" essay.[1] The inextricability of the linking was what caught my imagination: Even if economic factors often pressure and determine historical life, it does not follow that history is *about* economic relations. As I read him, then and now, Lukács is arguing that every social formation, and by inference every revolution is a revolution about what it is to be a human being—a revolution in the meaning of being human. The idea of a revolution is not for determining an ultimate goal, but rather for instituting a new experiment in the very idea of what it is to be a human being; and that thought, which, the only thinker I know who has really embraced it is Castoriadis, that thought that what we are living through and what we want, again, are different experiments in the very idea of being a human being, seems to me powerful, important, and contrary to orthodoxy of every kind. I do not know of any vision that has that kind of historicism and that sense of historical potentiality. Without that thought, however, revolutionary ideas become forms of dogmatism.

JS: What is the relationship between philosophy, or, between politics and art? Throughout your career, you have often turned to art objects to work through moral and political questions, providing a powerful account of the meaning of art as a social practice and of the autonomous modernist artwork as a form of resistance to the dominance of instrumental reason under capitalism. In *The Fate of Art* from 1992, you take up Kant, Heidegger, Derrida, and Adorno in order to develop the subversive logic of the modernist sublime and to show how Adorno, specifically, is able to give up the philosophical search for transcendental conditions of experience and to perform the "ethical act of self-consciousness that brings the subject before and into his or her historical situation." Did the turn to Deconstruction mark a shift in your thinking away from the concerns of a specifically Marxist aesthetics?

JB: There are various models of what it means to carry on left-wing thought. What interested me first in Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, and even more so as I got into Adorno, is equally what I should have already known but failed to learn from Schiller, which was that a great artistic culture is always a stand-in for an absent politics. So, if art is important, it is because politics is in some important aspect absent. In a way, then, to ask about the politics of art is a mistake, because the very existence of a thriving artistic culture is the site and sign of an absent radical politics. There is a scission in Adorno's thought between the political and the aesthetic. That was Schiller's lesson. Schiller said–his great insight–the French Revolution failed, but also succeeded; that is why we had further bourgeois revolutions. But Schiller then said, "okay, now we need art in order to educate us for a revolution that could succeed." So that is the model of aesthetic education; in a way, all left aesthetic theories are versions of Schiller, including Marxian views. Schiller had the picture of a fragmented modernity together with the idea of the failure of revolution leading to the need for an aesthetic education; it was not yet a socialist revolution, but the failure of the bourgeois revolution that concerned Schiller. But the model of revolutionary failure and aesthetic education fit the 20th century failures of socialist revolutions to a T.

Aesthetic Theory is the great work of modernist aesthetics. It is the premier aesthetic work of the 20th century, and it is the premier work thinking through the meaning of modernism. Nothing comes even near it on either of those counts. So, the first answer is that the idea for me was to ask the question of how a certain kind of work could keep radical politics alive in the course of its absence.

I thought the meaning of *Fate of Art* was to displace Heidegger and Derrida. Heidegger thought that revolution and aesthetic interruption were the same thing and that aesthetic reception would be what might save us. He did not see art as the stand-in for an absent revolution. He thought, in a way like Benjamin, only conservatively, that art would itself presage or even be the revolution, right? So he really did have a version of the Sublime. Derrida was the purest of pure philosophers, a transcendental philosopher, and he was a decent, passionate liberal. But my goal there was not to reduce Marxian critical theory to another form of critical deconstruction but just the opposite, to give that the right historical context so that it could be more generally effective.

JS: Adorno says, in *Aesthetic Theory*, "[transformative] praxis is not the effect of works, rather it is encapsulated in their truth content."[2] Can an ethical understanding of his aesthetics, which is the way that you characterize it in *The Fate of Art*, account for Adorno's insistence on the self-conscious collective project of emancipation with which art tasks us through its truth content?

JB: One thing Adorno has in mind when he says "[transformative] praxis is not the effect of works, rather it is encapsulated in their truth content," is that every authentic work of art gives us the idea of a collective act of self-determination. Every work of art is already imagining a form of collective taking control of the world; and it seems to me that is what I meant in part by saying that, by removing the deconstructive transcendental, and demonstrating how artworks take the subject and bring her into her historical situation, namely, how an isolated individual who has yet to understand the possibility of collective activity of a transformative kind is tacitly and imaginatively confronted by that possibility when encountering a significant modernist work of art. By phrasing it in terms of the ethical, I did not mean to deny a collective political project, but to infuse it with a more than formal content.

JS: Adorno emphasizes art's status not just as a form of protest, or a way of resisting the domination of nature by instrumental rationality, but as a form of social knowledge. He even remarks at several points in *Aesthetic Theory* that the practical effects of art are negligible and that it requires philosophy. He understands art as grasping the essence of social reality and giving form to its deepest and most pervasive contradictions. What does art's capacity to tell the truth about social reality, to concretely embody social contradictions, have to do with aesthetic resistance as you understand it? Is there intersection or divergence of political and ethical concerns at this point? To put the question slightly differently, if the essence of art is grasping a contradiction intrinsic to capitalist reality, is art not the expression of the need for revolution?

JB: I am not sure that the last phrasing puts the same question differently. Of course, if art is already the stand-in for an absent politics, an absent transformative politics, then, even on Schiller's account, art is about the need for revolution. Behind Schiller/Adorno is the thought that a revolutionized society would have nothing like art in our sense. Whatever a future society would have, whatever would fill that kind of place of art, would be of a very different character and play a very different role than art plays in our world. That is something that, for example, Benjamin tries to imagine with his idea of art as a practice of everyday learning—the surgical invasion of the body through the camera, that sort of thing. He is imagining what kind of other role it could play. And in a society that is politically constituted, it would be a directly political role. Conversely, here and now the existence of art speaks to the absence of a transformative praxis.

It is easy to imagine that we have the wrong kind of economy and political formation. It is easy to imagine that we have got the wrong institutions. But it seems contradictory to think that a radical Marxist theory should say that the deep problem concerning the structure of capitalist modernity is that it has the wrong form of cognition and the wrong form of rationality, because that makes it sound as if the wrongness is at the level of philosophy. How could it be the case that the wrongness of the world is the wrong form of reason? And it is not clear to me, by the way, that Marx understood this. Certainly, both Hegel and Nietzsche are obsessed by this issue. They both think that modernity is in the grip of a mistaken form of reason and rationality, and that that form of reason and rationality, which Adorno will call instrumental reason—what goes under the name Socratism in Nietzsche and of 'the understanding' in Hegel—holds in place the intelligibility and rationality of a wrong form of life.

So a wrong form of life turns out to be not just a social problem, e.g. we do not have the will to feed our poor or we have the wrong institutions. Rather, it turns out to be something deep in the foundations of what we think knowing is, what we think reason is, and what we think norms are. When Adorno turns to works of art, he is trying to unearth an alternative form of encountering, and a different structure of experience from that portrayed in our routine social practices of acting and knowing, in just the way that Nietzsche did, and in just the way that Hegel turns to dialectic against Kantian understanding. The magic of the argument is that everyone knows that aesthetic and artistic experience is not like everyday experience, that there is something intense about it or challenging about it that is of a different character. What Adorno wants to say is that a different structure of experience, a different relationship to the object, and a different rationality is hibernating in advanced artworks and needs to be elaborated. Because the truth of our world is that it is false, in that it has false forms of encounter, false, pseudo-conceptions of individuality, and a life that does not live. For this reason, aesthetics is always the return of the repressed, but what has been repressed is, along with first nature, a form of cognition and a form of reasoning. Now, putting it in those terms is, as I have come to think, overly narrow. The hegemony of instrumental reason is true—that is what it means to say that the work of art is the return of the repressed and embodies social contradiction.

JS: You do not see, then, capitalism itself as essentially contradictory in a way that finds expression in works of art? Rather, in your terms, the contradiction of art is not reducible to the contradiction of capital?

JB: I am not convinced that Marx thought that capital was essentially contradictory. There is a passage from *Das Kapital*, near the end of Volume One, where I think Marx gives an ethical critique. It is in the passage where he says "modern industry never views or treats the existing form of production process as the definitive one; its technical basis is therefore revolutionary, whereas all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative," and then, after kind of elaborating this thought about machinery transforming itself all the time, he says, "we have seen how this form of contradiction does away with all repose, all fixity, and all security as far as the worker's life situation is concerned, how it constantly threatens by taking away the instruments of labor to snatch from his hands the means of subsistence by suppressing his special functions to make him superfluous."[3] It sounds like the present, doesn't it? It's uncanny! He then goes on "we have seen too how this contradiction bursts forth without restraint in the ceaseless human sacrifices required from the working class, the reckless squandering of labor powers and the devastating effects of social anarchy–this is the negative side." I want to emphasize the negative side here is presented in wholly ethical terms. And, if we thought that that was a mistake, he goes on to say in the same paragraph that the "monstrosity," his word, the disposable working population held in reserve in misery for whatever are the needs of capital, need to be replaced, he says, by

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