
THE THIRD ANNUAL PLATYPUS INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION

OPENING PLENARY:

THE POLITICS OF CRITICAL THEORY

The opening plenary of the third annual Platypus Affiliated Society international convention, held April 29–May 1, 2011 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, was a panel discussion between Nicholas Brown of the University of Illinois at Chicago, Chris Cutrone of Platypus, Andrew Feenberg of Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, and Richard Westerman of the University of Chicago. The panelists were asked to address the following: “Recently, the New Left Review published a translated conversation between the critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer causing more than a few murmurs and gasps. 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 as directly as possible and to simply ask: How did the practice and theory of Marxism, from Marx to Lenin, make possible and necessary the politics of Critical Theory?” The full audio recording of the event is available at: <http://www.archive.org/details/PlatypusForumThePoliticsOfCriticalTheory>

Opening Remarks

Waiting for history: Horkheimer and Adorno’s theatre of the absurd

Andrew Feenberg

In 2010 the *New Left Review* (NLR 65) translated a dialogue between Horkheimer and Adorno on “a new manifesto.”¹ This dialogue, which took place in 1956, is only understandable against the background of Marx and Lukács’s interpretation of the theory-practice relation. In this talk I will try to explain how that background blocks the production of the manifesto and reduces discussion of it to absurdity. But first, let me show how Horkheimer and Adorno set up the problem.

Their dialogue is a strange document. The pretension to update the *Communist Manifesto* written by Marx and Engels in 1848 is astonishing, particularly given the silliness of much of their talk. For example, what are we to make of the first exchanges on the misplaced love of work, which then devolve into a conversation about the anal sounds emitted by a motorcycle? The dialogue returns constantly to the question of what to say in a time when nothing can be done. The communist movement is dead, killed off by its own grotesque success in Russia and China. Western societies are better than the Marxist alternative that nevertheless symbolically represents an emancipated future. Horkheimer is convinced that the world is mad and that even Adorno’s

modest hope that things might work out someday stinks of theology. Horkheimer remarks, "We probably have to start from the position of saying to ourselves that even if the party no longer exists, the fact that we are here still has a certain value." In sum, the only evidence that something better is possible is the fact that they are sitting there talking about the possibility of something better.

Horkheimer asks, in this situation, "In whose interest do we write?" "People might say that our views are just all talk, our own perceptions. To whom shall we say these things?" He continues, "We have to actualize the loss of the party by saying, in effect, that we are just as bad [off] as before but that we are playing on the instrument the way it has to be played today." And Adorno replies, cogently and rather comically, "There is something seductive about that idea—but what is the instrument?" Although Adorno remarks tentatively at one point that he has "the feeling that what we are doing is not without its effect," Horkheimer is more skeptical. He says, "My instinct is to say nothing if there is nothing I can do." And he goes on to discuss the tone and content of the manifesto in such a way as to reduce it to absurdity: "We want the preservation for the future of everything that has been achieved in America today, such as the reliability of the legal systems, the drugstores, etc. This must be made quite clear whenever we speak about such matters." Adorno replies, "That includes getting rid of TV programmes when they are rubbish." Contradicting himself, Horkheimer concludes the recorded discussion with the grim words, "Because we are still permitted to live, we are under an obligation to do something."

In 1955, shortly before this exchange occurred, Samuel Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot*. The speculations of Vladimir and Estragon anticipate Max and Teddie's absurdist dialogue. Vladimir says, for instance: "Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed....But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late!"²

This introduction to the discussion of Horkheimer and Adorno's text may seem unfair. Do they deserve my mockery? "Yes and no," to quote Horkheimer. In one sense their text is already self-mocking. The lighthearted tone of many of the exchanges shows them to be well aware of the literal impossibility of carrying out their project. Horkheimer claims that the tone in which the manifesto is written must somehow overcome its futility in the present period when it can have no practical effect. Something similar takes place in the dialogue. The tone reveals what cannot be explained adequately about the contradiction between the existential situation of the speakers and their project. But they do try

their best to make the contradiction explicit.

The obstacle is their conception of the relation of theory to practice. Adorno points out that Marx and Hegel reject abstract ideals and reconstruct the concept of the ideal as the next historical step. This means that theory must be tied to practice, to real historical forces. As Horkheimer later says: "Reality should be measured against criteria whose capacity for fulfillment can be demonstrated in a number of already existing, concrete developments in historical reality" (55).

But, Adorno argues, Marx and Hegel did not live in a world like ours in which the unwillingness to take the next step blocks the actual realization of utopia. Under these conditions, the temptation to utopian speculation returns, but the pressure to meet the Hegelian-Marxist historical desideratum blocks the further progress of thought. Horkheimer concludes that, "the idea of practice must shine through in everything we write" without any compromise or concession to the actual historical situation, a seemingly impossible demand. This yields what he calls "a curious waiting process," which Adorno defines as, "in the best case...theory as a message in a bottle" (56, 58).

What is most peculiar about this exchange is the refusal of these two philosophers to derive a critical standard from philosophical reflection once history can no longer supply it. This is what Habermas would do later: admit the breakdown of the Hegelian-Marxist historical approach and establish a properly philosophical basis for critique. If no "next step" lights the way, perhaps ethics can do the job in its place. But Horkheimer and Adorno insist on the importance of situating their thought historically both in terms of their own position and the absence of a party and a movement. As Horkheimer notes, "We have to think of our own form of existence as the measure of what we think." How can critique negate the given society since that society is the critic's sole existential support? The critic is the highest cultural product of the society. In the absence of any realistic alternative his capacity to negate the society justifies it. He can neither escape from history into the transcendental, as Habermas would have it, nor can he rest his historical case on the progressive movement of history. No wonder the dialogue wavers between the comic and the portentous.

How did Marxism end up in such a bind? As I mentioned at the outset, I believe this question leads back to Marx and Lukács. Lukács's important book *History and Class Consciousness* contained the most influential reflection on the relation of theory and practice in the Marxist tradition. He renewed the Hegelian-Marxist historical critique of abstract ideals that underlies the dilemma at the heart of the dialogue. This text was known to Horkheimer and Adorno and its impact on their own reflections is obvious.

Lukács introduces the problem of theory and practice through a critique of an early text in which Marx demands that theory “seize the masses.” But, Lukács argues, if theory seizes the masses it stands in an external relation to their own needs and intentions. It would be a mere accident if the masses accomplished theoretical goals. Rather, theory must be rooted in the needs and intentions of the masses if it is to be really and truly the theory of their movement and not an alien imposition.

Lukács takes up this theme at a more abstract level in his critique of Kantian ethics. In Lukács’s terms, the antinomy of theory and practice is an example of the more general antinomy of value and fact, “ought” and “is.” These antinomies arise from a formalistic concept of reason in terms of which theory and practice are alien to each other. This concept of reason fails to discover in the given facts of social life those potentialities and tendencies leading to a rational end. Instead, the given is conceived as fundamentally irrational, as the merely empirical, factual residue of the process of formal abstraction in which rational laws are constructed. Lukács explains, “Precisely in the pure, classical expression it received in the philosophy of Kant it remains true that the ‘ought’ presupposes an existing reality to which the category of ‘ought’ remains inapplicable in principle.”³ This is the dilemma of bourgeois thought: political rationality presupposes as its material substratum an irrational social existence hostile to rational principles. The rational realm of citizenship, illuminated by moral obligation, stands in stark contradiction to the crude world of civil society, based on animal need and the struggle for existence.

But, if this is true of bourgeois theory, what of the theory of the proletarian movement? Is Marxism just a disguised ethical exigency opposed to the natural tendencies of the species? This is the flaw of heroic versions of communism, which oppose morality to life. Demanding sacrifice for the party, the next generation, and the “worker,” conforms precisely to the bourgeois pattern Lukács criticizes. This is not Marx. Starting from the Hegelian critique of abstract ethics, the early Marx arrived at a general concept of revolutionary theory as the “reflection” of life in thought.

There is for example a letter to Ruge in which Marx writes: “Until now the philosophers had the solution to all riddles in their desks, and the stupid outside world simply had to open its mouth so that the roasted pigeons of absolute science might fly into it.” Instead, philosophy must proceed from actual struggles in which the living contradiction of ideal and real appears. The new philosopher must “explain to the world its own acts,” showing that actual struggles contain a transcending content that can be linked to the concept of a rational social life. “We simply show it [the world] why it struggles in

reality, and the consciousness of this is something which it is compelled to acquire, even if it does not want to.” “The critic,” Marx concludes, “therefore can start with any form of theoretical and practical consciousness and develop the true actuality out of the forms inherent in existing actuality as its ought-to-be and goal.” This is what Horkheimer meant by his remark that society must be measured against “concrete developments in historical reality.” As Marx writes elsewhere, “It is not enough that thought should seek to realize itself; reality must also strive toward thought.”

Marx’s later writings are ambiguous, conserving only traces of this reflexive theory of consciousness, as for example in this brief passage in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Just as little must one imagine that the democratic representatives are indeed all shopkeepers or enthusiastic champions of shopkeepers. . . . What makes them representatives of the petty bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drives the latter practically. This is, in general, the relationship between the political and literary representatives of a class and the class they represent.⁴

This passage invites revision to say that the proletariat too confronts “problems” that are “solved” theoretically by Marxism in a way that reflects the similar practical solution to which its life circumstances drive the class.

Unfortunately, the later Marx did not make such an application of this suggestive remark. Instead, he proposed the historical materialist theory of the “determination of thought by being.” This deterministic language leaves open the question of the relation of Marxist theory to proletarian class consciousness.

This is the question Lukács addressed. He needed to show that Marxism was not related in a merely accidental manner to the thought and action of proletarians, that it is not a scientific “consciousness from without,” for which the proletariat would serve as a “passive, material basis,” but that it was essentially rooted in the life of the class. His misunderstood theories of reification and class consciousness relate to the form in which the social world is given immediately to the consciousness of all members of a capitalist society. Lukács writes that “in capitalist society reality is—immediately—the same for both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.” And again: “The proletariat shares with the bourgeoisie the reification of every aspect of

its life.” However, the experience of reification differs depending on class situation. It is interesting that Lukács cites as evidence for this one of the few Marxian passages on alienation to which he had access. “The property-owning class and the class of the proletariat represent the same human self-alienation. But the former feels at home in this self-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.”

Bourgeois and proletarians experience the “same” alienation, Marx claims, but from different vantage points. Similarly, Lukács remarks that where the capitalist perceives lengthening the work day as a matter of increasing the quantity of labor power purchased at a given price, for the worker this “quantity changes into quality.” The worker goes beyond the reified quantitative determinants immediately given in the reified form of objectivity of his labor because he cannot ignore the real qualitative degradation of life and health associated with them. Thus, “the quantitative differences in exploitation which appear to the capitalist in the form of quantitative determinants of the objects of his calculation, must appear to the worker as the decisive, qualitative categories of his whole physical, mental and moral existence.”

The proletariat sees beyond immediacy in the act of becoming (socially) self-conscious. This self-consciousness penetrates beneath the reified form of its objects to their “reality.” This more or less spontaneous critique of reification gives rise to everyday practices that can be developed into the basis of a revolutionary movement by union and party organizations.

Lukács thus claims that the workers’ response to the reification of experience under capitalism is the foundation on which Marxist dialectics arise. In a sense one could say that Marxism and the proletariat share a similar “method,” demystifying the reified appearances each in its own way—the one at the level of theory, the other at the levels of consciousness and practice. Where the theory shows the relativity of the reified appearances to deeper social structures, workers live that relativity in resisting the imposition of the reified capitalist economic forms on their own lives. Both theory and practice lead to a critique of the economic and epistemological premises of capitalism. As Marx himself writes in *Capital*, “So far as such criticism represents a class, it can only represent the class whose vocation in history is the overthrow of the capitalist mode of production and the final abolition of all classes—the proletariat.”

Marx and Lukács established the methodological horizon of Marxism for the Frankfurt School. This is the

background against which Horkheimer and Adorno discuss their new manifesto. They accept the critique of pure theory; but now that the proletariat no longer supports a transcending critique of society, any concession to practice drags theory back into the realm of everyday political wheeling and dealing or, worse yet, into complicity with the murder of millions by totalitarian communist regimes. As Adorno remarks, “What is the meaning of practice if there is no longer a party? In that case doesn’t practice mean either reformism or quietism?”

There appears to be no way out of the trap set by the tension between norm and history, now that the revolution has failed. To return to the “roasted pigeons of absolute science,” that is, to some sort of utopian or transcendental thinking, is now impossible. But there is no way to anticipate the “next step” of history toward a better world. Horkheimer poses the dilemma in two contradictory propositions, saying, on the one hand, “Our thoughts are no longer a function of the proletariat,” and, on the other hand, that “Theory is theory in the authentic sense only where it serves practice. Theory that wishes to be sufficient unto itself is bad theory.”

Is there no alternative within the Marxist framework? In fact there is an excluded alternative occasionally evoked in the course of the dialogue. This alternative, referred to derisively is Marcuse, who hovers like Banquo’s ghost over the conversation. Adorno comes closest to articulating this position and is pulled back by Horkheimer each time. At one point he remarks, “I cannot imagine a world intensified to the point of insanity without objective oppositional forces being unleashed” (42). This will turn out to be the thesis Marcuse hints at in *One-Dimensional Man* and develops in *An Essay on Liberation*. But Horkheimer rejects this view as overly optimistic. A bit later Adorno refuses to accept that human nature is inherently evil. “People only become Khrushchevs because they keep getting hit over the head” (44). But again Horkheimer rejects the hope of a less repressive future and even ridicules Marcuse by claiming he expects a Russian Bonaparte to save the day and make everything right.

What are we to make of this ghostly presence of a Marcusean alternative? It seems to me that these remarks already anticipate and condemn Marcuse’s openness to the return of the movement in the form of the New Left. Where Horkheimer and Adorno ultimately rejected the New Left, Marcuse took the Hegelian-Marxian- Lukácsian plunge back into history. Adorno was sympathetic to the movement at first but eventually condemned what he called its “pseudo-activism.” Marcuse was well aware that the New Left was no equivalent to Marx’s proletariat, but he tried to find in it a hint of those “objective oppositional forces” of which Adorno spoke in 1956. In this way theory might be

related once again to practice without concession to existing society, although also with no certainty of success.

Marcuse's important innovation was to recognize the prefigurative force of the New Left without identifying it as a new agent of revolution. We still live under the horizon of progressive politics established by the New Left; its issues are still ours although of course transformed in many ways by time. But the most significant impact of the New Left is on our identity as leftists. The New Left invented a non-sectarian form of progressive opposition that defines the stance of most people on the Left today.

Much to Marcuse's surprise, on his 80th birthday, Beckett published a short poem as a tribute to him. The poem recognizes the obstinacy required by the seemingly impossible demands of the Frankfurt School's stance toward history. Here is the poem:

<i>pas à pas</i>	<i>step by step</i>
<i>nulle part</i>	<i>nowhere</i>
<i>nul seul</i>	<i>not a single one</i>
<i>ne sait comment</i>	<i>knows how</i>
<i>petits pas</i>	<i>tiny steps</i>
<i>nulle part</i>	<i>nowhere</i>
<i>obstinément</i>	<i>stubbornly</i>

Lukács's party and social praxis

Richard Westerman

The foundational texts of Critical Theory, Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness [HCC]* and Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*, were the products of a crisis in European Marxism. Both published in 1923, they represented a response to both failed and successful revolutions: whilst the Bolsheviks had taken control of Russia despite its relative underdevelopment, Communist governments in Hungary and Germany had rapidly been toppled due to a lack of popular support. Notably, both Lukács and Korsch had served in these governments—Lukács himself on the front lines with the Hungarian Red Army. Though memorably condemned as “Marxism of the Professors” by the nascent Soviet orthodoxy, the deeply philosophical readings of Marx that Korsch and Lukács developed were very much the product of their personal involvement in and response to practical revolutionary situations.

The fact that these books were written, as Lukács

observed, as “attempts, arising out of actual work for the party, to clarify the theoretical problems of the revolutionary movement” is usually forgotten.⁵ This is evident in the reception of the concept of reification. Loosely, reification describes a social pathology in which individuals understand society and social relations through fixed, unalterable laws, with the result that they feel isolated and unable to change society. It is usually—wrongly—assumed that Lukács's solution is an updated version of German Idealism, according to which the proletariat suddenly realizes that it is the creator of this objective world, and so spontaneously reappropriates its creation to free itself. As a result, Lukács's account of the role of the party in the final essay of *HCC* is read through this misinterpretation of reification, and he is accused of paving the way for a centralized state controlled by an authoritarian party. On this standard interpretation, Lukács apparently believes that because the proletariat *hadn't* realized that it was the subject of history, the revolutionary party simply needed to act for them. He is seen as endorsing a Blanquist party that would deteriorate into post-revolutionary dictatorship.

Surprisingly few of Lukács's interpreters have recognized that he actually envisages a much more democratic party. The central reason for this common misrepresentation is a failure to understand adequately what Lukács means by his central concept of reification, and the way it shapes his theory of party organization. Most interpretations of Lukács think reification is a mistake made by a thinking subject—even if the mistake is attributed to social reasons. The party would then try to correct this mistake. Reification does not, however, describe an epistemology; from the outset, it describes a type of praxis. Lukács's party isn't there to play the role of a wise leader to guide the proletariat—it's there to provide a locus for genuinely dereified, and thus dereifying praxis. Rather than a Blanquist cadre of professional revolutionaries, Lukács's party is essentially a more institutionalized version of Rosa Luxemburg's *Mass Strike*.

I am going to start by tracing the roots of the problem Lukács is trying to solve to Marx's critique of the distinction between state and civil society in “On The Jewish Question” [*OJQ*], and showing how this problem clearly could not be solved by a vanguardist party. I'll then consider Lukács's own position: I'll argue that his vision of the party sits somewhere between Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, in that he sees the formal organization provided by the party as essential for real proletarian class consciousness. Finally, I'll suggest a few ways in which this might provide a model for the sort of democratic activity that might provide a counterweight to existing social and political structures.

Marx's *OJQ*, written in response to Bruno Bauer's

pamphlet on the question of full Jewish emancipation within the German state, radically reinterprets the meaning of social freedom. Arguing that the secularization of the state would only mean the reproduction of religious division at the level of society, Marx questioned the Hegelian division of state and civil society. Civil society, for Hegel, was the realm of particular satisfaction and immediate social unity: the individual was tied to other individuals through an economic system of needs, rationalized through social institutions built on this basic necessity. In contrast, the state was the realm of rational freedom, in which citizens were united as rational universal individuals. For Marx, this was an alienated form of freedom: first, it meant that political forms seemed to come from an impersonal universal force of reason, rather than free human action; second, it treated the categories of social existence as invariable, necessary, and open only to knowledge, not change. Marx proposed, therefore, that we bring heaven down to earth and make society itself into the realm of freedom by transforming social relations themselves. Real freedom thus means collective control over such relations.

It's this sort of freedom that Lukács sees in party activity. But I think it should be obvious at once why a party that sought to carry out revolution on behalf of the proletariat would be unable to realize it. Such a party would reduce the working class to the role of spectators, just as unfree as before. In fact, Lukács is extremely clear in his rejection of such a top-down party, and it's hard to see how an honest and rigorous reading could come up with any other conclusion. He states explicitly that "even in theory, the communist party does not act on behalf of the proletariat,"⁶ lest it reduce the masses to "a merely *observing*, contemplative" attitude that leads to "the voluntaristic overestimation of the active significance of the individual (the leader) and the fatalistic underestimation of the significance of the class (the masses)."⁷ And he repeatedly uses the word "reification" to caution against fixing any one organizational form and insulating it from criticism or change by the masses. Lukács could not be more clear: a top-down, proto-Stalinist party would represent a return to the lack of freedom of capitalist society.

Lukács draws heavily on Rosa Luxemburg, which was perhaps rather an unusual tactic in 1922, when the success of the Bolsheviks seemed to indicate a clear victory for Lenin's idea of a disciplined cadre of revolutionaries. The mass strike in which she vested such hopes was supposed to bring about the spontaneous development of class consciousness by forcing all strata of the working class into organizing themselves. Luxemburg's party plays a very secondary role, little more than a sort of secretarial role in fact, and certainly not any kind of leadership.

Nevertheless, Lukács also repeatedly praises Luxemburg for her insights. He explicitly endorses her criticisms of Western European parties who underestimated mass action, and thought only an educated party was ready to assume leadership.⁸ However, he suggests that she makes the opposite mistake, and criticizes her for "underplaying of the role of the party in the revolution."⁹ As we've seen, he doesn't think this role entails "leadership" in a conventional sense, so to understand what Lukács means, we need to look a little more closely at his definition of reification.

Most interpretations of Lukács take reification to be an epistemological error. The problem they think Lukács identifies is that the categories that capitalist society is construed in are too abstract and formal. As a result, they think his project is to replace such categories with more substantial ones that "accurately" reflect the qualitative underlying reality. Unfortunately, this interpretation doesn't withstand a close reading of the text.¹⁰ Reification—*Verdinglichung*, "thingification"—doesn't refer to a problem of abstraction, of quantity opposed to a qualitative substrate—but rather to the undialectical ossification of forms as things that cannot be changed. This is clear enough in the central essay of the book, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." Here, Lukács presents an interpretation of what he calls "bourgeois" philosophy, the classical German thought of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel. He identifies the epistemological preoccupation of such philosophy: it *starts* from the separation of subject and object; therefore, its central question is, How far can our knowledge and its forms match up with a reality that is external to consciousness? This epistemological standpoint, Lukács argues, reduces us to mere spectators of society: we think it is only possible to grasp it through predetermined forms. Lukács's problem with this isn't that the forms are wrong—rather, it's the very attempt to separate subject, object, and consciousness from one another. We can see what Lukács means by "reification" in the more detail in the way he talks about the party.

In the first place, Lukács's party essentially serves as the institutional form of proletarian class consciousness. Without a party, such consciousness would be formless and immediate; the proletariat needs to give an institutional form to its self-consciousness in order to understand itself properly. The party, therefore, is the form that the revolutionary proletariat gives itself. The leading sections of the working class organize *themselves* in a party. As Lukács puts it, "the organizational independence of the communist party is necessary, in order that the proletariat can see its own class consciousness, as a historical form ... so that, for the whole class, its own existence as a class can be raised to the level of consciousness."¹¹ Whereas a Blanquist party

would be there to tell the workers what to think, the Lukácsian party embodies the proletariat in its organizational forms. Moreover, these forms aren't just a representation of what is already there – a more or less accurate representation of an underlying substrate of labor or essence. Rather, Lukács states that the party is the proletariat's "act of self-conscious becoming." It's only by taking on form for itself that the proletariat really becomes a class.

Furthermore, the close ties Lukács establishes between form and existence indicate how reification could return as a problem in the organization of the party. Though tactical concerns play some role in organization, this should not result in the imposition of certain forms in the name of exigency. Rather, what's crucial is that forms come from the self-organization of the proletariat. "The emergence of the communist party," as he says, "can only be the consciously-performed work of the class-conscious workers."¹² As a result, organization is not a once-and-for-all action: Lukács is not trying to replace one set of (abstract, quantifiable, capitalist) forms with other, more "authentic," or "qualitative" forms. To do this would be, he suggests, to risk the return of reification—which he identifies with the organizational structures of party leadership. For Lukács, it's not so much what the party does that matters, but more the opportunities it affords proletarians to become actively involved in shaping the forms of their existence. He writes, "insofar as the communist party becomes a world of activity for every one of its members, it can overcome the contemplativity of bourgeois man."¹³

Lukács identifies the party as the practical overcoming of reification. "Organization is the form of mediation between theory and practice."¹⁴ Like Luxemburg, he rejects a Blanquist party that takes control on behalf of the workers. But he goes beyond Luxemburg in his insistence on some kind of fluid institutional form for proletarian consciousness, without which it would be vague and ineffective. Dereification, therefore, is necessarily practical—it means deliberate engagement in practices that give form to one's own existence. The party is practical consciousness, the embodiment of such forms in a way that allows for their transformation.

Although Lukács's account rests very specifically on the conditions of the industrial working classes and the phenomenological construction of proletarian self-consciousness, I think his fundamental concept of dereified praxis can help inform progressive democratic organization more generally. Even within current social and political forms, the idea of reification can be used to critique universalist discourses of rights, starting from a fixed standpoint that makes it impossible to negotiate the boundaries of citizenship or group membership in any

substantial way. More radically, though, Lukács's party provides a model for broad-based social action. Democratization would, for Lukács, entail much more comprehensive involvement in forming our social relations than just reformation of legal and political categories. We should understand social forms through the idea of practices—that is, structured, repeatable interactions that acquire a certain significance or meaning within the totality of a culture. It is these practices that become reified. Rather than seeing them as things that we do, things that are recharged with meaning only because we continue to practice them, we wrongly treat them as fixed and immutable. Social practices can seem almost divinely sanctioned. Alternatively, we might come up with a supposedly scientific theory that explains such practices in terms of an eternal, unchangeable human nature that inevitably develops into specific social forms. We seem only able to interact in these ways.

Dereification would entail a deliberate transformation of these practices: we should, Lukács would argue, treat our practices as things we can adapt to circumstances. We cannot recreate social forms at will out of nothing—but at the same time, by recognizing that forms as practices are things we *do*, we can open them to steady transformation. At the suggestion of Sourayan Mookerjea, I'd like to point to the alter-globalization example, as a model. Alter-globalists welcome the growth of global interaction and cooperation that current development has generated. However, they reject neo-liberal ideas that such development can only take place in one way, determined by scientifically-knowable economic processes. Alter-globalization therefore tries to develop alternative social practices, orienting itself towards positive redefinition of social interaction, not the unthinking rejection of internationalism.

Lukács's model of the party also indicates ways such activity needs to be carried out: it must be a grassroots movement with a deliberate orientation towards the problem of its own organization. That is, emancipatory movements shouldn't view themselves as instrumentally-oriented towards attaining a particular end; rather, they need to devote much of their energy to themselves, and to shaping the ways in which they hold together as organizations. In doing so, they afford their members an opportunity for the very sort of dereified praxis that Lukács aspires to.

To sum up: Lukács's understanding of the revolutionary Party aims to fulfill some of the emancipatory goals of Marx's *OJQ*. Rather than a centralized cadre of professional vanguardists, Lukács's party is shaped by Luxemburgian aspirations of grassroots self-organization. By interpreting the party as the conscious form of social relations, Lukács

indicates the importance of some objective presentation of our practices, if we are to understand our social existence properly. But he also suggests a new definition of praxis. The very act of self-organization, or of consciously modifying the practices that make up our social and cultural totality is, for Lukács, the essence of revolutionary praxis. If we accept certain ways of interacting as eternal and unchangeable, we succumb to reification. Only by constantly struggling against the ossification of our practices into unchangeable forms can we hope to be emancipated.

Adorno's "Leninism"

Chris Cutrone

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 addressee. As Horkheimer put it, the danger was in speaking like an "oracle;" he asked simply, "To whom shall we say these things?"¹⁵ It was not simply due to American exile in the Nazi era or 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 1918–19, deeply affected their perspective on political possibilities in their historical moment. The question is, in what way was this Marxism?

A series of conversations between Horkheimer and Adorno from 1956, at the height of the Cold War, provide insight into their thinking and how they understood their situation in the trajectory of Marxism in the 20th century. Selections from the transcript were recently published in the *New Left Review* (2010), under the title "Towards a New Manifesto?" The German publication of the complete transcript, in Horkheimer's collected works, is under the title "Discussion about Theory and Praxis," and 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, on the model of Marx's celebrated critique of the Gotha Programme that had founded 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 what he called the "re-establishment of a socialist party," "could not appear in Russia, while in the United States and Germany it would be worthless." 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" (57). Thus, they tasked themselves to try to continue Marxism, if only as "theory."

Now, it is precisely the supposed turning away from political practice and retreat into theory that many commentators have characterized as the Frankfurters' 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 Institute in exile, that is, after being forced to abandon their work in collaboration with the Soviet Marx-Engels Institute, for example, which was as much due to Stalinism as Nazism. Rather, it pointed back to what Karl Korsch, a foundational figure for the Institute, wrote in 1923: that the crisis of Marxism, that is, the problems that had already manifested in the era of the Second International in the late 19th century (the so-called "Revisionist Dispute"), and developed and culminated in its collapse and division in World War I and the revolutions that followed, meant that the "umbilical cord" between theory and practice had been already "broken." Marxism stood in need of a transformation, in both theory and practice, but this transformation could only happen as a function of not only practice but also theory. They suffered the same fate. For Korsch in 1923, as well as for Georg Lukács in this same period, in writings seminal for the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg were exemplary of the attempt to rearticulate 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 theoretical self-understanding, of the problem Marxism faced at that historical moment. As Adorno remarks, "I have always wanted to . . . develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin" (59). So, the question becomes, "faithful" in what way?

Several statements in two writings by Horkheimer and Adorno's colleague, Herbert Marcuse, his "33 Theses" from 1947, and his book *Soviet Marxism* from 1958, can help shed light on the orientation of the members of the Frankfurt School towards the prior politics of "communism," specifically of Lenin. Additionally, several letters from Adorno to Horkheimer and Benjamin in the late 1930s explicate Adorno's positive attitude towards Lenin. Finally, writings from Adorno's last year, 1969, the "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" and "Resignation," restated and further specified the content of his "Leninism" in light of his critique of the 1960s New Left. The challenge is to recognize the content of such "Leninism" that might otherwise appear obscure or idiosyncratic, but actually points back to the politics of the early 20th century that was formative of Adorno and his cohort. Then, the question becomes, what was the significance of such a perspective in the later period of Adorno's life? How did such "Leninism" retain purchase under changed conditions, such that Adorno could bring it to bear, critically, up to the end of his life? Furthermore, what could Adorno's perspective on "Leninism" reveal about Lenin himself? Why and how did Adorno remain a Marxist, and how did Lenin figure in this?

One clear explanation for Adorno's "Leninism" was the importance of consciousness in Adorno's estimation of potential for emancipatory social transformation. For instance, in a letter to Horkheimer critical of Erich Fromm's more humane approach to Freudian psychoanalysis, Adorno wrote that Fromm demonstrated "a mixture of social democracy and anarchism . . . [and] a severe lack of . . . dialectics . . . [in] the concept of authority, without which, after all, neither Lenin's [vanguard] nor dictatorship can be conceived of. I would strongly advise him to read Lenin." Adorno thought that Fromm thus threatened to deploy something of what he called the "trick used by bourgeois individualists against Marx," and wrote to Horkheimer that he considered this to be a "real threat to the line . . . which [our] journal takes."¹⁶

But the political role of an intellectual, theoretically informed "vanguard" is liable to the common criticism of Leninism's tendency towards an oppressive domination over rather than critical facilitation of social emancipation. A more complicated apprehension of the role of consciousness in the historical transformation of society can be found in Adorno's correspondence on Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in 1936. There, Adorno commended Benjamin's work for providing an account of the relationship of intellectuals to workers along the lines of Lenin. As Adorno put it in his letter,

The proletariat . . . is itself a product of bourgeois

society. . . . [T]he actual consciousness of actual workers . . . [has] absolutely no advantage over the bourgeois except . . . interest in the revolution, but otherwise bear[s] all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character. . . . We maintain our solidarity with the proletariat instead of making of our own necessity a virtue of the proletariat, as we are always tempted to do—the proletariat which itself experiences the same necessity and needs us for knowledge as much as we need the proletariat to make the revolution. I am convinced that the further development of the . . . debate you have so magnificently inaugurated . . . depends essentially on a true accounting of the relationship of the intellectuals to the working class. . . . [Your essay is] among the profoundest and most powerful statements of political theory that I have encountered since I read [Lenin's] *The State and Revolution*.¹⁷

Adorno likely had in mind as well Lenin's *What is to be Done?* or "*Left-Wing*" *Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. In the former, Lenin (in)famously distinguished between "trade union" and "socialist consciousness." But in the latter work, Lenin described the persistent "bourgeois" social conditions of intellectual work *per se* that would long survive the proletarian socialist revolution, indeed (reiterating from *What is to be Done?*) that workers became thoroughly "bourgeois" by virtue of the very activity of intellectual work (such as in journalism or art production), including and perhaps especially in their activity as Communist Party political cadre. For Lenin, workers' political revolution meant governing what would remain an essentially bourgeois society. The revolution would make the workers for the first time, so to speak, entirely bourgeois, which was the precondition of their leading society beyond bourgeois conditions.¹⁸ It was a moment, the next necessary step, in the workers' self-overcoming, in the emancipatory transformation of society in, through and beyond capital. Marxism was not extrinsic but intrinsic to this process, as the workers' movement itself was. As Adorno put it to Horkheimer, "It could be said that Marx and Hegel taught that there are 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" (54). Lukács had mentioned this about Lenin, in a footnote to his 1923 essay in *History and Class Consciousness*, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," that,

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 realisation of the young Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*.¹⁹

This was not fully achieved in the revolution that began to unfold from 1917 to 1919 in Russia, Germany, Hungary, and Italy, but was cut short of attaining the politics of the socialist transformation of society. Thirty years later, in the context of the dawning Cold War following the defeat of the Nazis in World War II, Marcuse’s “33 Theses” tried to take stock of the legacy of the crisis of Marxism and the failure of the revolution:

[Thesis 3:] [T]o uphold without compromise orthodox Marxist theory . . . [i]n the face of political reality . . . would be powerless, abstract and unpolitical, but when the political reality as a whole is false, the unpolitical position may be the only political truth. . . .

[Thesis 32:] [T]he political workers’ party remains the necessary subject of revolution. In the original Marxist conception, the party does not play a decisive role. Marx assumed that the proletariat is driven to revolutionary action on its own, based on the knowledge of its own interests, as soon as revolutionary conditions are present. . . . [But subsequent] development 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 today are not this subject, but it is just as true that only they can become it. Only in the theories of the communist parties is the memory of the revolutionary tradition alive, which can become the memory of the revolutionary goal again. . . .

[Thesis 33:] The political task then would consist in reconstructing revolutionary theory.²⁰

As Marcuse put it in 1958, in *Soviet Marxism*,

During the Revolution, it became clear to what degree Lenin had succeeded in basing his strategy on the actual class interests and aspirations of the workers and peasants. . . . Then, from 1923 on, the decisions of the leadership increasingly dissociated from the class interests of the proletariat. The former no longer presuppose the proletariat as a revolutionary agent but rather are imposed upon the proletariat and the rest of the underlying population.²¹

Adorno’s commentary in conversation with Horkheimer in 1956, in a passage not included in the *New Left Review* translation, titled “Individualism,” addressed what he called the problem of subjectivity as socially constituted, which he thought Lenin had addressed more rigorously than Marx. Adorno said that,

Marx was too harmless; he probably imagined quite naively 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 milieu theory. Lenin was the first person to assert this.²²

What this meant for Adorno was that the struggle to overcome the domination of society by capital was something more and other than the class struggle of the workers against the capitalists. It was not merely a matter of their exploitation. For it was not the case that social subjects were products of their class position so much as bourgeois society under capital determined all of its subjects in a historical nexus of unfreedom. Rather, class position was an expression of the structure of this universal unfreedom. As Horkheimer wrote, in “The Little Man and the Philosophy of Freedom,”

In socialism, freedom is to become a reality. But because the present system is called “free” and considered liberal, it is not terribly clear what this may mean. . . .

The businessman is subject to laws that neither he nor anyone else nor any power with such a mandate created with purpose and deliberation. They are laws which the big capitalists and perhaps he himself skillfully make use of but whose existence must be accepted as a fact. Boom, bust, inflation, wars and even the qualities of things and human beings the present society demands are a function of such laws, of the anonymous social reality. . . .

Bourgeois thought views this reality as superhuman. It fetishizes the social process. . . .

[T]he error is not that people do not recognize the subject but that the subject does not exist. Everything therefore depends on creating the free subject that consciously shapes social life. And this subject is nothing other than the rationally organized socialist society which regulates its own existence. . . . But for the little man who is turned down when he asks for a

job because objective conditions make it impossible, it is most important that their origin be brought to the light of day so that they do not continue being unfavorable to him. Not only his own lack of freedom but that of others as well spells his doom. His interest lies in the Marxist clarification of the concept of freedom.²³

Such a clarification of what would constitute a progressive-emancipatory approach to the problem of capital was cut short by the course of Marxism in the 20th century. It thus also became increasingly difficult to “bring to the light of day” the “origins” of persistent social conditions of unfreedom. In many respects, the crisis of Marxism had been exacerbated but not overcome as a function of the post-World War I revolutionary aftermath. This involved a deepening of the crisis of humanity: the Frankfurt Institute Critical Theorists were well aware that fascism as a historical phenomenon was due to the failure of Marxism. Fascism was the ill-begotten offspring of the history of Marxism itself.

A decade after 1917, Horkheimer wrote, in a passage titled “Indications,” that,

The moral character of a person can be infallibly inferred from his response to certain questions. . . . In 1930 the attitude toward Russia casts light on people’s thinking. It is extremely difficult to say what conditions are like there. I do not claim to know where the country is going; there is undoubtedly much misery. . . . The senseless injustice of the imperialist world can certainly not be explained by technological inadequacy. Anyone who has the eyes to see will view events in Russia as the continuing painful attempt to overcome this terrible social injustice. At the very least, he will ask with a throbbing heart whether it is still under way. If appearances were to be against it, he will cling to this hope like the cancer patient to the questionable report that a cure for his illness may have been found.

When Kant received the first news of the French Revolution, he is said to have changed the direction of his customary stroll from then on.²⁴

Despite what occurred in the unfolding of developments in 20th century history, Horkheimer and Adorno never reversed course. Are we yet ready to receive their messages in a bottle?

Responses

NB: It does seem to me that these three papers are

essentially raising the same question—though not explicitly. So that is the one I am going to ask. I confess I never finished the Adorno-Horkheimer dialogue, precisely because of the Beckettian flavor. They are obviously dealing with an impossibility there, which is how are you going to maintain fidelity to Lenin without a party, without a viable party to affiliate with or without a concept of party that is operative. Of course the question then becomes: What is to be done when there’s nothing to be done?

There is a tragic version of this in *Negative Dialectics*, where Adorno knowingly throws in his lot with the Stoics and frames his own position as essentially a stoic position, knowing better than, or as well as, anyone that the entire ethical force of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which Marx inherits, is the impossibility or the complicity of the stoic position.

The self-effacement of their language is similar to what in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the unhappy consciousness—which oscillates precisely for the same reason as Adorno. Because their unhappy consciousness is incapable, in the words of Chris quoting Lukács, of seizing the next link; because there is no next link—which is again the problem of the party.

So that brings us to the question of the “party” in Lukács. My question for Andrew is What *do* we do—what is to be done—without a party? You seem to suggest that Marcuse offers an answer.

Richard shows that, for Lukács, “the party” is not so much a thing, necessarily, as it is a concept. The party is that thing that mediates between the subject in history. The moment we deny epistemology, the moment we deny ontology, the moment we deny Kant, the moment we deny representation, both as a philosophical and a political concept, we are in this Hegelian universe and there becomes an obligation to find “the party,” “the next link,” or “a mediation.” It is that obligation that Adorno finds himself unable to fulfill. That is both the comedy and the tragedy of Adorno. So my question for you is the same: What does the philosophical concept of the party look like today? Your answer is a sort of autonomist, Negrian answer, which seems to be me to be an unsatisfactory solution, since Hegel is waiting for Hardt and Negri as well. That the subject is a fiction but nonetheless a fiction that is necessary—rather like a party is necessary.

And so, Chris, it seems that in Marx, in Lukács, and certainly in Adorno and Marcuse, there is an unresolved tension between the notion of universal unfreedom and the notion of exploitation. The latter, within our present moment has to do with fragility and who is and who is not protected from the winds of history, which is not quite the same question as universal unfreedom and disalienation.

The notion of disalienation, the romantic side of eruptions in Marx, in Lukács, and in the Frankfurt school, seem to be what needs to be abandoned in favor of the more hard-headed emphasis on exploitation. If, for the Frankfurt School, the ideal was the next step or link in the chain, what does the Hegelian idea mean in the present?

AF: What I like about Marcuse is that he was able to separate two things, which for Marx, Lukács, and Lenin were essentially connected. One of those things was the subject of revolution and the other was the force able to dereify at least some portion of the social reality. In the classical Marxist conception, it's the workers who dereify, by their refusal to submit passively to the forms in which their lives are cast, and it's also the workers who are going to create the new society. What Marcuse realized was that you could have one without the other. You could have dereifying gestures, express solidarity with them, and articulate them theoretically without any confidence at all that those making such gestures were capable of overthrowing the society and creating a new society. After the events of May 1968 in France, it was clear that that a historically new type of opposition had arisen, so I think he was right to try and join Marx's theory to that opposition. I think that is still a significant alternative to the despair of Adorno and Horkheimer or, on the other side, to the attempts to revive a traditional Marxist proletarian party.

RW: My answer to "what is to be done" is that it's not really our place to say. I think that would be Lukács's response. I think the party, or any form of organization, rather than being viewed as the instrument, is more to be seen as the way in which the multiplicity of wills become, not necessarily one, but at least learn to think of themselves as united. Not so much for the specific decisions by which they come to practical action, but more about the self-organization, the institutional forms they give themselves.

I think Lukács's critique of Hegel and, indeed, bourgeois philosophy in general, stems from the idea of a subject; the idea that we should conceive of action as a subject acting on a world and recognizing himself. What he sees in the party is the entity, if I can use such an ontologically reifying term, the entity that is a subject in so far as it manifests itself objectively through its organizational forms. That is slightly different from conceiving the party as the agent.

CC: What we are discussing is political form. In other words, the party is a form. What we are talking about is the party as mediation: the mediation of theory and practice, a mediation of subject and object positions.

On the notion of the Hegelian ideal as the next step for Horkheimer and Adorno, I would offer something

speculatively, not literally: Andrew noted the fundamental ambiguity of the late Marx with respect to the way he conceived philosophy as a young man. But I would argue that the question of mediation recurs. The critique of political economy is not merely an analysis of "bourgeois" forms, but rather an analysis and critique of the incipient consciousness of the workers' movement. The workers' movement inherited political economy, bourgeois critical consciousness, but only when the thought of the bourgeoisie itself had grown vulgar. Marx commends Adam Smith for being willing to present society as self-contradictory. So I would situate the question of what is the next step with respect to the question of the critique of capital. How then would one rearticulate Marx's own political praxis with his theoretical critique of capital, which is the Hegelian attempt to raise social form to the level of self-consciousness, for working class militants, who were coming up against certain very determinate obstacles in their political practice in the wake of the revolutions of 1848. There was a "meeting," if you will, to put it back in Adorno's more traditional terms, of the intellectuals and the workers, around the question of what is the purchase of the critique of capital.

Post-60s, there was a return to Marx: there was a return to the Hegelian Marxism with respect to the critique of capital. If we describe ourselves as intellectuals, then the very point would be to ask, "How can these ideas find traction?" Korsch says that the crisis of Marxism threatens to break the umbilical cord between theory and practice; this means that these are two separate things. I would stress mediation in the concept of form, over the liquidation of theory and practice in the concept of form or party.

Q & A

If we as Marxists, communists, or would be radicals/ revolutionaries, are not in a position to speak, then we should ask: What would be required to transform ourselves into those that could speak? How can we write like Lenin and Mao? I was struck by the Adorno-Horkheimer dialogue; Horkheimer was certainly not alone in attributing the deaths in the Great Leap Forward to Mao and Stalin. What if instead of putting their messages in a bottle, Horkheimer and Adorno had sent their messages to China, and hadn't prematurely written off that actual revolution?

RW: There isn't a prohibition on "speaking" as such. But it depends on whether we're speaking *ex cathedra* or from within something else. I agree with Habermas in his

insistence that when we're talking about these things we have to participate on an equal level with everyone else. A danger that Lenin himself noted, in those final furious letters demanding that the party should stay as far away as possible from the soviets, was that in all likelihood honest workers and peasants would be either intimidated or look in awe at the wise men from Moscow. What we should do to be able to speak, then, is deny who we are, if anything. I think that is always the danger for anyone speaking with any badge of authority. It leads to this kind of intellectual leadership problem where precisely the freedom that people like Marx envisage is sidelined.

AF: I disagree! There are no ignorant peasants any more. Those who are the most vociferous in opposing any intellectual authority are themselves intellectuals. So, that's just another theory! I don't know that there is a problem, really; it's more a question of, "Is there anyone who is willing to listen?" rather than, "Are we oppressive in putting forward our views?" That's my conclusion, from having participated in the good old days, in many struggles over this question of authority.

CC: In terms of the self-transformation of intellectuals, it isn't a problem of who's speaking, but rather of what's being said. I would introduce another kind of Leninist category, namely, "tailism." There is a problem of articulating historical consciousness and empirical realities. I want to return to an issue that was raised by both Andrew and Richard that I thought was very helpful with respect to reification. What Lukács meant by reification was the Second International, the socialist workers' movement, as it had been constituted in that historical juncture. And this is why he was sympathetic to Luxemburg, because Luxemburg critiques that party form in the *Mass Strike* pamphlet, in which she argues that social democracy had become an impediment or obstacle to the workers' movement in, I would say, a subject-object dialectic: the workers' movement generated itself historically into an object of self-critique.

Now, why Horkheimer's afraid of China is the apparent "revolutionary" success of what he and Adorno considered to be counter-revolution, namely, Stalinism. Having lived through the 30s and the transformation of Marxism in Stalinism, to see Stalinism flourish as the Marxism of the post-World War II period, they could only regard as a sign of the regression of Marxism itself. Now, why didn't they send their "messages in a bottle" to intellectuals in China? Because it would have been a sure-fire way of getting those Chinese intellectuals executed on the spot. We could read their statements as evincing an anti-Chinese bias *prime facie*. But there is a dialectic there. As

Horkheimer says, well, what about the fact that 20 million Chinese are going to die, but after that there won't be any more starving Chinese? He asks what do we make of that? What Horkheimer and Adorno had in mind is that, had the success of the revolution that had opened in 1917 spread to Germany, had it spread beyond, a revolution in China as took place in 1949, with all the sacrifices and the calamities that it entailed, would have been unnecessary. This was their image of emancipation; their concern was that the conditions of barbarism were being confused for the struggle for emancipation.

NB: On the space of intellectuals, when there is a mass movement, the situation of the intellectual is both much easier and much more difficult. It is easy because you know what to do but the project of transformation that you're talking about is hard. The problem we're facing is a different one, which is that there is no mass movement. And to the extent that there is one, it's a totally corrupt, right-wing one.

Adorno very clearly throws in his lot with the West, so it's not a matter of getting Adorno to actual Chinese dissidents, it's a matter of the question: Did Adorno have to, that clearly, throw his lot in with the West and so clearly server links with actual existing socialism? That question is a little less clear-cut than whether it would have been beneficial to have Chinese dissidents parroting the Adornian line.

Kant demanded that we think politically, in that we are forced to comment on society as members of that same society; we are obligated to contribute to the development of society. Lukács saw that only through the party can society continue developing, therefore the question of individual responsibility in history seems somewhat misplaced. It is only the party that, having the ability to shape history, is obligated to think about history. Can it be that this is what motivates Lenin and Luxemburg when talking about the party? That is, when Luxemburg worries about the vote in the Reichstag about the war credits, the concern is about the decline of the party and the need to reconfigure the party to affect history?

RW: I disagree. Lukács doesn't think that the party can change history, it is the class that can change history. The party brings the class about. The party might be the starting point but it's emphatically not the end-point. To say the party changes history directly would give it the kind of heroic role that, I think, Lukács is trying to avoid.

CC: I would say that the political party, or the agency of political mediation, can't, itself, emancipate society. However, it can certainly block that emancipation, and so

be thought of negatively. The importance of the party hinges on the issue of historical consciousness. So where I'm more in sympathy with Luxemburg's critique of the SPD in its political collapse is her charge that the party is responsible for history, negatively. She is saying that the party has been part of bringing history to this point of crisis, and it is the party that is tasked with self-overcoming in its form of mediating political agency.

First: I find the Lenin described—mediated through Adorno and Lukács—completely unrecognizable from the Lenin of the collected works. But what I recognize as being described as Lenin in Adorno and Lukács is the resolution of the Second and Third Congresses of the Comintern on the role of the political party in the proletarian revolution. Does this not encapsulate a false history of the Bolshevik party? A history of the Bolshevik party that projects back the character which the Bolshevik party assumed between 1918 and 1921, under the civil war conditions, onto the pre-history of the Bolshevik party before 1917?

Second: For Marx and Engels, consistently, from the 1840s through to Engels's death, with a brief interlude in the period in the First International when they were in alliance with the Proudhonists, the issue as stated in the 1871 Hague Congress Resolution was that, "the working class cannot act except by forming itself into a political party." How do the attempts to make Marx more Hegelian satisfactorily account for this political aspect of Marx and Engels's interventions?

CC: Maybe the difference that you see between the Lenin that you would recognize and the Lenin of official Comintern Leninism is the difference that you then raise between Marx himself, in his own political practice, or Marx and Engels, and the sort of Hegelianized Marx that you find in Lukács and Adorno.

Lenin has a specific contribution in the history of Marxism that can't be ignored, namely that he's the great schismatic of Marxism, he divided Marxism.²⁵ That is precisely what esteems him in Adorno's eyes. His is not a minority vanguard view; it is about politics *in* the working class. What Lenin introduces in the Second International is the idea of competing working class parties that all claim to be anti-capitalist, revolutionary, and Marxist. The crisis of Marxism refers to the political controversies within Marxism. To deny that is to say that politics is only "the workers vs. the capitalists" and not an intra-working class phenomenon. The Kautskyan party, the "one class, one party" idea, that vis-à-vis the capitalists the workers are of *one* interest, and the attempt to be the "party of the whole class," denies that the content of political emancipation can be disputed among the workers and among Marxists of

different parties.

AF: It seems to me that the position Lenin took could not be easily explained or justified in terms of Marxist theory, and that what someone like Lukács was engaged in doing in 1923, or Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks*, was an attempt to ground that practice in Marxist theory by finding the missing link. There are many different statements in Lenin, in his early work, that don't add up to a theory of what he was doing. But he knew what he was doing, and it had a significance historically, as Chris has just explained. So the question could be asked separately from the historical facts of whether Lenin was doing the right things in terms of Marx's theory. Lukács recognized that Lenin had done something historically important and tried to figure out how to revise or interpret the theory in such a way that it could encompass what he had done. Lukács did make an important advance theoretically in terms of understanding how there could be a connection between the working class, Marxist theory, and the political parties that represent workers; how there could be a connection grounded in an ontological relation, a relation to reality that would be shared at different levels, in different ways, between these different instances of the movement. That is a very important theoretical idea, which I don't think you can find in Marx or Engels or in Lenin, but is necessary to make sense of what happened, historically.

RW: Lukács is very clear that he wants the party, ultimately, to grow into a mass-based movement. But in the interim, he explicitly states in the essay on party organization, every different school, every different take on the very question of what the party should do needs to give itself organizational forms. He's all for a broad, *pluralist* sprouting of different practices, which, I think, undermines the idea of a single, concentrated, vanguardist party. This might risk radical sectarianism, but at least it avoids reification, from Lukács's perspective.

NB: Whether Lukács and Adorno got Lenin right, is not the same question and is usefully distinct from the question of whether Lenin was politically useful, and what is to be done today. On the Hegelianization of Marx, you can't "Hegelianize" Marx, because Marx is more Hegelian than Hegel!

I take it that the primary thrust of the argument that Adorno is a Leninist is to enlist the Leninist Adorno in the project of reconstituting the Left. What is the utility of Adorno as Leninist?

CC: Adorno enlisted himself to the Leninist project. He says so: "I want to be faithful to Lenin." What is the content of

that? He said this when 99.99% of Leninists in the world would not have accepted that Adorno was being faithful to Lenin in any way. So I would turn the issue around and say that I am interested in the Lenin that becomes visible through Adorno. When Adorno says “a strictly Leninist manifesto,” it’s not that this is against Luxemburg. It’s the Lukácsian attempt to grasp what the Second International radicals had in common. Why did Luxemburg call herself a Bolshevik? She wrote an essay in the last months of her life titled “What is German Bolshevism?” In other words, “This is what we want. Why are we with the Bolsheviks?” Hers was *comradely* criticism—that’s the point. So I am interested in how this history of Marxism looks, specifically through Adorno’s eyes, through Lukács’s eyes, through Korsch’s eyes; we would be remiss to ignore the insights that they had into that history.

AF: At this moment in history, we know so little about the forces of opposition, their potential, and where they’re going to come from next, that we won’t have the theoretical basis and the basis in practical experience that the socialist movement had at the time when these parties were formed and developed. Under present conditions, we need to try and find sources of opposition and tensions around the reifying power of the institutions wherever they appear, even if they don’t look or appear to be political. We would prematurely close things down trying to have a theory and a party that was trying to direct struggles.

CC: What is meant by the party? On the one hand, the formation of a party of a recognizable type from history, at the present moment, would foreclose possibilities. On the other hand, I have my own reservations about the Hardt-Negri moment that we’re in with respect to movementism, which sees the party as the road to Stalinism. If we say that the earlier socialist movement had an accumulated historical experience, then we have to say that, for a generation, we’ve been denied that. So we’re left saying, “OK, something like a party?” to expand the notion of “form.” What Richard is pointing to, in terms of the concept of form, is very important. The danger is in applying it too broadly, in what I raised earlier as tailism, as a justification for what we’re already doing. That’s a danger that I would resist at one end. At the other end, I agree that it would be precipitous and still-born to try to implement a party in a historical-model kind of way.

RW: The institutional memory of a party is crucial; I think that its absence has led to a disastrous collapse in progressive thought. I stressed the Luxemburgian elements in Lukács, earlier. This is where Lukács critiques Luxemburg, rightly, because a party can form this

institutional memory.

To address Andrew: we don’t really know what forces there are there. The act of forming or supporting the formation of parties is one of the ways we can find out. I refer back to what I said earlier about Lukács and his insistence that every position should try and develop its own organizational forms. That’s how we get to know. If we treat it as a purely sociological question, I think we risk falling back into the same reified standpoint of just collecting facts, rather than engaging in practice. Encouraging the development of parties, of institutional forms in various ways, is a way in which those oppositional forces can really come to be. Without that, the forces wind up less coherent and less aware of their opposition.

Without a push for the formation of a party, without a strong stance on a need for leadership, how can we apply these various theories practically to the working class? The conditions that existed in the 50s, 30s, or 20s are not what we have today. Without a party, without leadership, what hope do we have?

RW: I’d hesitate with that phrasing; it is dangerous to talk about applying theories to the working class. The leadership issue strikes at that. It was alluded to before, but I think the Tea Party is quite successful, for all of its obvious incoherencies and absurdities, precisely because of its lack of a leader and the dispensability of their totemic figures. There are voices, but there is no one leader, so there are a number of different Tea Parties. One of the reasons it’s so successful is that it is widespread, diffuse, and decentralized.

AF: Of course if we had a party that had authority and that was listened to, we’d be in much better shape. But how do you get there?

CC: What works for the Right cannot work for the Left. There’s a fundamental difference between the Right and the Left—that the Right thrives on incoherence in a way that the Left cannot. I would also say rather polemically, or in a jaundiced fashion, that the Tea Parties are the true children of the New Left.

The idea of theoretical leadership, in the sense of theory that is applied, is precisely something that the Marxist tradition wanted to overcome. That is what they understood as a “bourgeois” notion of theory or epistemology. Going all the way back to Kant, however, there was already the idea of a self-conscious practice: it’s not about the abstract application of theory to practice. Already with Kant—and there’s a continuity, I think, between Kant and Hegel and Marx—the point is to try to raise existing practices to self-

consciousness. This is quite different from crafting a theory and applying it to reality.

Concluding remarks

AF: I think that the Left still lives under the horizon of demands and dissatisfactions that emerged in the 1960s and 70s. Movements like environmentalist movements, feminist movements, many other kinds of protest that have emerged in remote areas of society, such as medicine, come under the kinds of categories elaborated in the New Left to articulate these new kinds of dissatisfactions. That is the contribution that Marcuse made; Adorno and Horkheimer did not contribute to that because they viewed the New Left as a rather minor blip on the horizon. And I'm actually extremely puzzled by the eclipse of Marcuse's thought on the Left and the rise of this new vision of the Frankfurt School as Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer. To me, it signifies a certain lack of political seriousness that people pass over the only one who actually engaged with the kind of leftism that we are capable of today.

RW: I'd also like to conclude by responding to the "lack of political seriousness." The reason for people like Adorno and Benjamin coming back is that much of the academic reception has been done in literature departments or it's been done through cultural studies. I think the reason is precisely that there is a lack of direct engagement and direct activity. The importance of engagement and some form of practice, with some degree of leadership that one attributes to it—a theoretical form of praxis—is the crucial thing, I think.

CC: I would end with a bid to take Adorno seriously as a political thinker and not just as a literary figure. Certainly, he does say, "Music and art are what I know and so they are what I write about." But he was being a bit falsely modest. His work made a very strong intervention in German sociology, introducing both American empirical sociological technique and the Durkheimian approach, as opposed to a Weberian approach, to the question of modernity and capital. In his correspondence with Marcuse in 1969, in which there was bitterness around the controversy stirred up by the New Left, Adorno says to Marcuse: "Look, it's the Institute. It's the same Institute. It's our old Institute." And Marcuse responds: "How could you possibly claim that the Institute in the 60s in the Federal Republic of Germany is what it was in the 30s?" To this Adorno could only say, "What about my books?" In other words, "What about the books that the Institute's existence has allowed me to

write?" That is, Adorno was a lone champion of Hegelian Marxism within German sociology and philosophy, as such his works are powerful statements about, and try to keep alive, the kind of insights that had been gained by the earlier Marxist tradition of Lukács and Korsch in the aftermath of the crisis of Marxism and the revolutions of the early twentieth century.

So I would defend Adorno against his devotees. The Adorno that flies in the humanities is a sanitized Adorno, a depoliticized Adorno, an Adorno with the Marxism screened out, or the Marxism turned into an ethical critique of society. Whereas I think Adorno has a lot more to say about the problem of theory and practice that is politically important. **IPR**

Transcribed by Gabriel Gaster.

Andrew Feenberg

1. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto?" trans. Rodney Livingstone, *New Left Review* 65 (September–October 2010). Hereafter cited within the text.
2. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), 51.
3. Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1923]), 160.
4. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Saul K. Padover. Originally published in 1852. Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>>.

Richard Westerman

5. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1923]), xli.
6. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, ii.505: "Auch theoretisch handelt die kommunistische Partei nicht stellvertretend für das Proletariat."
7. *Ibid.*, ii.496: "die voluntaristische Überschätzung der aktiven Bedeutung des Individuums (des Führers) und die fatalistische Unterschätzung der Bedeutung der Klasse (der Masse)."
8. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 297-8.
9. *Ibid.*, 275.
10. See, for example, Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism* (New York: Seabury, 1979)
11. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, ii.504: "die organisatorische Selbständigkeit der kommunistischen Partei ist notwendig, damit das Proletariat sein eigenes Klassenbewußtsein, als geschichtliche Gestalt, unmittelbar erblicken könne; . . . damit für die ganze Klasse das eigene Dasein als Klasse ins Bewußtsein gehoben werde."
12. *Ibid.*, ii.517: "das Entstehen der kommunistischen Partei nur das bewußt getane Werk der klassenbewußten Arbeiter sein kann."

13. Ibid., ii.515: "indem die kommunistische Partei zu einer Welt der Tätigkeit für jedes ihrer Mitglieder wird, kann sie die Zuschauerrolle des bürgerlichen Menschen . . . wirklich überwinden."

14. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 299.

Chris Cutrone

15. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto," trans. Rodney Livingstone, *New Left Review* 65 (September–October 2010): 46. Hereafter cited within the text.

16. Adorno to Horkheimer, March 21, 1936, quoted in Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994 [1986]), 266. Moreover, Adorno wrote that, "If one is concerned to achieve what might be possible with human beings, it is extremely difficult to remain friendly towards real people...a pretext for approving of precisely that element in people by which they prove themselves to be not merely their own victims but virtually their own hangmen." See Adorno to Horkheimer, June 2, 1941, quoted in Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 268.

17. Theodor W. Adorno, "Letters to Benjamin," *New Left Review* 91 (September–October 1973): 67–68.

18. As Lenin wrote in "Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder: "The most shameless careerism . . . and vulgar petty-bourgeois conservatism are all unquestionably common and prevalent features engendered everywhere by capitalism, not only outside but also within the working-class movement. . . . [T]he overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the conquest of political power by the proletariat — [creates] these very same difficulties on a still larger, an infinitely larger scale." Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/>>.

19. Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1923]), 221n60.

20. Herbert Marcuse, "33 Theses," in *Technology, War, and Fascism*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1998), 217, 226–227.

21. Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 149.

22. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis" (1956), in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 19, *Nachträge, Verzeichnisse und Register* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1996), 71, quoted in Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 233.

23. Max Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline, Notes 1926-31 and 1950-69*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury, 1978), 50–52.

24. Ibid., 72–73.

25. See Chris Cutrone, "Lenin's liberalism," *Platypus Review* 36 (June 2011).