Adorno's Leninism

Adorno, who was born in 1903 and lived until 1969, has a continuing purchase on problems of politics on the Left by virtue of his critical engagement with two crucial periods in the history of the Left: the 1930s "Old" Left and the 1960s "New Left." Adorno's critical theory, spanning this historical interval of the mid-20th century, can help make sense of the problems of the combined and ramified legacy of both periods.

Adorno is the key thinker for understanding 20th century Marxism and its discontents. As T. J. Clark has put it (in "Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?," 2003), Adorno "[spent a lifetime] building ever more elaborate conceptual trenches to outflank the Third International." The period of Adorno's life, coming of age in the 1920s, in the wake of the failed international anticapitalist revolution that had opened in Russia in 1917 and continued but was defeated in Germany, Hungary and Italy in 1919, and living through the darkest periods of fascism and war in the mid-20th century to the end of the 1960s, profoundly informed his critical theory. As he put it in the introduction to the last collection of his essays he edited for publication before he died, he sought to bring together "philosophical speculation and drastic experience." Adorno reflected on his "drastic" historical experience through the immanent critique, the critique from within, of Marxism. Adorno thought Marxism had failed as an emancipatory politics but still demanded redemption, and that this could be achieved only on the basis of Marxism itself. Adorno's critical theory was a Marxist critique of Marxism, and as such reveals key aspects of Marxism that had otherwise become buried, as a function of the degenerations Marxism suffered from the 1930s through the 1960s. Several of Adorno's writings, from the 1930s–40s and the 1960s, illustrate the abiding concerns of his critical theory throughout this period.

By the 1930s, with the triumph of Stalinist and social-democratic reformist politics in the workers' movement, on the defensive against fascism, Marxism had degenerated into an ideology merely affirming the interests of the working class. By contrast, Marx himself had started out with a perspective on what he called the necessity of the working class's own self-abolition (*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1843).

Marx inquired into the potential overcoming of historical conditions of possibility for labor as the justification for social existence, which is how he understood capitalist society. Marx's point was to elucidate the possibilities for overcoming labor as a social form. But Marx thought that this could only happen in and through the working class's own political activity. How was it possible that the working class would abolish itself?

Politics not pre-figurative

Mahatma Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." This ethic of "pre-figuration," the attempt to personally embody the principles of an emancipated world, was the classic expression of the moral problem of politics in service of radical social change in the 20th century. During the mid-20th century Cold War between the "liberal-democratic" West led by the United States and the Soviet Union, otherwise known as the Union of Workers' Councils Socialist Republics, the contrasting examples of Gandhi, leader of non-violent resistance to British colonialism in India, and Lenin, leader of the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and of the international Communist movement inspired by it, were widely used to pose two very different models for understanding the politics of emancipation.[1] One was seen as ethical, remaining true to its intentions, while the other was not. Why would Adorno, like any

[1] See, for instance, Louis Fischer's two complementary biographies, on Lenin (1964) and Gandhi (1950).

Marxist, have chosen Lenin over Gandhi? Adorno's understanding of capitalism, what constituted it and what allowed it to reproduce itself as a social form, informed what he thought would be necessary, in theory and practice, to actually overcome it, in freedom.

It is helpful to address the discussion of this problem by Leon Trotsky, who had been the 26 year-old leader of the Petersburg Soviet or Workers' Council during the 1905 Revolution in Russia. Trotsky wrote a chapter on the "pre-requisites of socialism" in his 1906 pamphlet *Results and Prospects*, where he addressed the issue of achieving what he called "socialist psychology," as follows:

> Marxism converted socialism into a science, but this does not prevent some "Marxists" from converting Marxism into a Utopia. . . .
>
> [M]any socialist ideologues (ideologues in the bad sense of the word — those who stand everything on its head) speak of preparing the proletariat for socialism in the sense of its being morally regenerated. The proletariat, and even "humanity" in general, must first of all cast out its old egoistical nature, and altruism must become predominant in social life, etc. As we are as yet far from such a state of affairs, and "human nature" changes very slowly, socialism is put off for several centuries. Such a point of view probably seems very realistic and evolutionary, and so forth, but as a matter of fact it is really nothing but shallow moralizing.
>
> It is assumed that a socialist psychology must be developed before the coming of socialism, in other words that it is possible for the masses to acquire a socialist psychology under capitalism. One must not confuse here the conscious striving towards socialism with socialist psychology. The latter presupposes the

absence of egotistical motives in economic life; whereas the striving towards socialism and the struggle for it arise from the class psychology of the proletariat. However many points of contact there may be between the class psychology of the proletariat and classless socialist psychology, nevertheless a deep chasm divides them.

The joint struggle against exploitation engenders splendid shoots of idealism, comradely solidarity and self-sacrifice, but at the same time the individual struggle for existence, the ever-yawning abyss of poverty, the differentiation in the ranks of the workers themselves, the pressure of the ignorant masses from below, and the corrupting influence of the bourgeois parties do not permit these splendid shoots to develop fully. For all that, in spite of his remaining philistinely egoistic, and without his exceeding in "human" worth the average representative of the bourgeois classes, the average worker knows from experience that *his simplest requirements and natural desires can be satisfied only on the ruins of the capitalist system*.

The idealists picture the distant future generation which shall have become worthy of socialism exactly as Christians picture the members of the first Christian communes.

Whatever the psychology of the first proselytes of Christianity may have been — we know from the Acts of the Apostles of cases of embezzlement of communal property — in any case, as it became more widespread, Christianity not only failed to regenerate the souls of all the people, but itself degenerated, became materialistic and bureaucratic; from the practice of fraternal teaching one

> of another it changed into papalism, from wandering beggary into monastic parasitism; in short, not only did Christianity fail to subject to itself the social conditions of the milieu in which it spread, but it was itself subjected by them. This did not result from the lack of ability or the greed of the fathers and teachers of Christianity, but as a consequence of the inexorable laws of the dependence of human psychology upon the conditions of social life and labour, and the fathers and teachers of Christianity showed this dependence in their own persons.
>
> If socialism aimed at creating a new human nature within the limits of the old society it would be nothing more than a new edition of the moralistic utopias. Socialism does not aim at creating a socialist psychology as a pre-requisite to socialism but at creating socialist conditions of life as a pre-requisite to socialist psychology. [Leon Trotsky, *Results and Prospects* (1906), in *The Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects* 3rd edition (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1969), 82, 97–99.]

In this passage, Trotsky expressed a view common to the Marxism of that era, which Adorno summed up in a 1936 letter to Walter Benjamin as follows:

> [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. . . . [W]e 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 . . . a true accounting of the relationship of the intellectuals to the working class.[2]

Adorno's philosophical idea of the "non-identity" of social being and consciousness, of practice and theory, of means and ends, is related to this, what he called the priority or "preponderance" of the "object." Society needed to be changed before consciousness.

Adorno's thought was preceded by Georg Lukács's treatment of the problem of "reification," or "reified consciousness." Citing Lenin, Lukács wrote, on "The Standpoint of the Proletariat," the third section of his 1923 essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," that,

> Reification is . . . the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society. It can be overcome only by *constant and constantly renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence by concretely relating to the concretely manifested contradictions of the total development, by becoming conscious of the immanent meanings of these contradictions for the total development.* But it must be emphasized that . . . the structure can be disrupted only if the immanent contradictions of the process are made conscious. Only when the consciousness of the proletariat is able to point out the road along which the dialectics of history is objectively impelled, but which it cannot travel unaided, will the consciousness of the proletariat awaken to a consciousness of the process, and only then will the proletariat become the identical subject-object of history whose praxis will change reality. If the proletariat fails to take this step the contradiction will remain unresolved and will be reproduced by the dialectical

[2] Letter of March 18, 1936, in Adorno, et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), 123–125.

> mechanics of history at a higher level, in an altered form and with increased intensity. It is in *this* that the objective necessity of history consists. The deed of the proletariat can never be more than to take the *next step* in the process. Whether it is "decisive" or "episodic" depends on the concrete circumstances [of this on-going struggle.][3]

Lukács thought 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 [1845] *Theses on Feuerbach*.[4]

In his third "Thesis" on Feuerbach, Marx wrote that,

> The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.
>
> The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice.[5]

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[3] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 197–198.
[4] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 221n60.
[5] Robert C, Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* 2nd edition (New York: Norton, 1978), 144.

So, what, for Adorno, counted as "revolutionary practice," and what is the role of "critical theory," and, hence, the role of Marxist "intellectuals," in relation to this?

Political role of intellectuals

In his 1936 letter to Benjamin, Adorno pointed out that,

> [I]f [one] legitimately interpret[s] technical progress and alienation in a dialectical fashion, without doing the same in equal measure for the world of objectified subjectivity . . . then the political effect of this is to credit the proletariat directly with an achievement which, according to Lenin, it can only accomplish through the theory introduced by intellectuals as dialectical subjects. . . . "*Les extrèmes me touchent*" ["The extremes touch me" (André Gide)] . . . but only if the dialectic of the lowest has the same value as the dialectic of the highest. . . . Both bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change. . . . Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up. It would be romantic to sacrifice one to the other . . . [as] with that romantic anarchism which places blind trust in the spontaneous powers of the proletariat within the historical process — a proletariat which is itself a product of bourgeois society.[6]

This conception of the dialectic of the "extremes" was developed by Adorno in two writings of the 1940s, "Reflections on Class Theory," and "Imaginative Excesses." In these writings, Adorno drew upon not only Marx and the best in the history of Marxist politics, but also the critical-theoretical digestion of this politics by Lukács.

In his 1920 essay on "Class Consciousness," Lukács wrote that,

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[6] Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928–40*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 129–130.

Only the consciousness of the proletariat can point to the way that leads out of the impasse of capitalism. As long as this consciousness is lacking, the crisis remains permanent, it goes back to its starting-point, repeats the cycle until after infinite sufferings and terrible detours the school of history completes the education of the proletariat and confers upon it the leadership of mankind. But the proletariat is not given any choice. As Marx says, it must become a class not only "as against capital" but also "for itself;" that is to say, the class struggle must be raised from the level of economic necessity to the level of conscious aim and effective class consciousness. The pacifists and humanitarians of the class struggle whose efforts tend whether they will or no to retard this lengthy, painful and crisis-ridden process would be horrified if they could but see what sufferings they inflict on the proletariat by extending this course of education. But the proletariat cannot abdicate its mission. The only question at issue is how much it has to suffer before it achieves ideological maturity, before it acquires a true understanding of its class situation and a true class consciousness.

Of course this uncertainty and lack of clarity are themselves the symptoms of the crisis in bourgeois society. As the product of capitalism the proletariat must necessarily be subject to the modes of existence of its creator. This mode of existence is inhumanity and reification. No doubt the very existence of the proletariat implies criticism and the negation of this form of life. But until the objective crisis of capitalism has matured and until the proletariat has achieved true class consciousness, and the ability to understand the crisis fully, it cannot go beyond the criticism of reification and so it is only negatively superior to its

> antagonist. . . . Indeed, if it can do no more than negate some aspects of capitalism, if it cannot at least aspire to a critique of the whole, then it will not even achieve a negative superiority. . . .
>
> The reified consciousness must also remain hopelessly trapped in the two extremes of crude empiricism and abstract utopianism. In the one case, consciousness becomes either a completely passive observer moving in obedience to laws which it can never control. In the other it regards itself as a power which is able of its own — subjective — volition to master the essentially meaningless motion of objects.[7]

In "The Standpoint of the Proletariat," Lukács elaborated further that,

> [T]here arises what at first sight seems to be the paradoxical situation that this projected, mythological world [of capital] seems closer to consciousness than does the immediate reality. But the paradox dissolves as soon as we remind ourselves that we must abandon the standpoint of immediacy and solve the problem if immediate reality is to be mastered in truth. Whereas[,] mythology is simply *the reproduction in imagination of the problem in its insolubility*. Thus immediacy is merely reinstated on a higher level. . . .
>
> Of course, [the alternative of] "indeterminism" does not lead to a way out of the difficulty for the individual. . . . [It is] nothing but the acquisition of that margin of "freedom" that the conflicting claims and irrationality of the reified laws can offer the individual in capitalist society. It ultimately turns into a mystique of intuition which leaves the fatalism of the external reified world even

[7] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 76–77.

more intact than before[,] [despite having] rebelled in the name of "humanism" against the tyranny of the "law." . . .

Even worse, having failed to perceive that man in his negative immediacy was a moment in a dialectical process, such a philosophy, when consciously directed toward the restructuring of society, is forced to distort the social reality in order to discover the positive side, man as he exists, in one of its manifestations. . . . In support of this we may cite as a typical illustration the well-known passage [from Marx's great adversary, the German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle]: "There is no *social way* that leads out of this social situation. The vain efforts of *things* to behave *like human beings* can be seen in the English [labor] strikes whose melancholy outcome is familiar enough. *The only* way out for the workers is to be found in *that sphere within which* they can still be *human beings* . . . ."

[I]t is important to establish that the abstract and absolute separation[,] . . . the rigid division between *man as thing*, on the one hand, and *man as man*, on the other, is not without consequences. . . . [T]his means that every path leading to a change in this reality is systematically blocked.

This disintegration of a dialectical, practical unity into an inorganic aggregate of the empirical and the utopian, a clinging to the "facts" (in their untranscended immediacy) and a faith in illusions[,] as alien to the past as to the present[,] is characteristic. . . .

> The danger to which the proletariat has been exposed since its appearance on the historical stage was that it might remain imprisoned in its immediacy together with the bourgeoisie.[8]

In "Reflections on Class Theory," Adorno provided a striking re-interpretation of Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* as a theory of emancipation from history:

> According to [Marxian] theory, history is the history of class struggles. But the concept of class is bound up with the [historical] emergence of the proletariat. . . . By extending the concept of class to prehistory, theory denounces not just the bourgeois . . . [but] turns against prehistory itself. . . . By exposing the historical necessity that had brought capitalism into being, [the critique of] political economy became the critique of history as a whole. . . . All history is the history of class struggles because it was always the same thing, namely, prehistory. . . . This means, however, that the dehumanization is also its opposite. . . . Only when the victims completely assume the features of the ruling civilization will they be capable of wresting them from the dominant power.[9]

Adorno elaborated this further in the aphorism "Imaginative Excesses," which was orphaned from the published version of Adorno's book *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1944–47). Adorno wrote that,

> Those schooled in dialectical theory are reluctant to indulge in positive images of the proper society, of its members, even of those who would accomplish it. . . . The leap into the future, clean over the conditions of the present, lands in the past.

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[8] Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 194–196.
[9] Theodor W. Adorno, "Reflections on Class Theory" (1942), in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 93–110.

In other words: ends and means cannot be formulated in isolation from each other. Dialectics will have no truck with the maxim that the former justify the latter, no matter how close it seems to come to the doctrine of the ruse of reason or, for that matter, the subordination of individual spontaneity to party discipline. The belief that the blind play of means could be summarily displaced by the sovereignty of rational ends was bourgeois utopianism. It is the antithesis of means and ends itself that should be criticized. Both are reified in bourgeois thinking. . . . [Their] petrified antithesis holds good for the world that produced it, but not for the effort to change it. Solidarity can call on us to subordinate not only individual interests but even our better insight. . . . Hence the precariousness of any statement about those on whom the transformation depends. . . . The dissident wholly governed by the end is today in any case so thoroughly despised by friend and foe as an "idealist" and daydreamer. . . . Certainly, however, no more faith can be placed in those equated with the means; the subjectless beings whom historical wrong has robbed of the strength to right it, adapted to technology and unemployment, conforming and squalid, hard to distinguish from the wind-jackets of fascism: their actual state disclaims the idea that puts its trust in them. Both types are theatre masks of class society projected on to the night-sky of the future . . . on one hand the abstract rigorist, helplessly striving to realize chimeras, and on the other the subhuman creature who as dishonour's progeny shall never be allowed to avert it.

What the rescuers would be like cannot be prophesied without obscuring their image with falsehood. . . . What can be perceived, however, is what they will

not be like: neither personalities nor bundles of reflexes, but least of all a synthesis of the two, hardboiled realists with a sense of higher things. When the constitution of human beings has grown adapted to social antagonisms heightened to the extreme, the humane constitution sufficient to hold antagonism in check will be mediated by the extremes, not an average mingling of the two. The bearers of technical progress, now still mechanized mechanics, will, in evolving their special abilities, reach the point already indicated by technology where specialization grows superfluous. Once their consciousness has been converted into pure means without any qualification, it may cease to be a means and breach, with its attachment to particular objects, the last heteronomous barrier; its last entrapment in the existing state, the last fetishism of the status quo, including that of its own self, which is dissolved in its radical implementation as an instrument. Drawing breath at last, it may grow aware of the incongruence between its rational development and the irrationality of its ends, and act accordingly.

At the same time, however, the producers are more than ever thrown back on theory, to which the idea of a just condition evolves in their own medium, self-consistent thought, by virtue of insistent self-criticism. The class division of society is also maintained by those who oppose class society: following the schematic division of physical and mental labour, they split themselves up into workers and intellectuals. This division cripples the practice which is called for. It cannot be arbitrarily set aside. But while those professionally concerned with things of the mind are themselves turned more and more into technicians, the growing opacity of capitalist mass society makes an association between

> intellectuals who still are such, with workers who still know themselves to be such, more timely than thirty years ago [at the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution]. . . . Today, when the concept of the proletariat, unshaken in its economic essence, is so occluded by technology that in the greatest industrial country [the United States of America] there can be no question of proletarian class-consciousness, the role of intellectuals would no longer be to alert the torpid to their most obvious interests, but to strip the veil from the eyes of the wise-guys, the illusion that capitalism, which makes them its temporary beneficiaries, is based on anything other than their exploitation and oppression. The deluded workers are directly dependent on those who can still just see and tell of their delusion. Their hatred of intellectuals has changed accordingly. It has aligned itself to the prevailing commonsense views. The masses 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. Only if the extremes come together will humanity survive.[10]

The problem of means and ends

A principal trope Stalinophobic Cold War liberalism in the 20th century was the idea that Bolshevism thought that the "ends justify the means," in some Machiavellian manner, that Leninists were willing to do anything to achieve socialism. This made a mockery not only of the realities of socialist politics up to that time, but also of the self-conscious relation within Marxism itself between theory and practice, what came to be known as "alienation." Instead,

[10] Theodor W. Adorno, "Messages in a Bottle," *New Left Review* I/200 (July–August 1993), 12–14.

Marxism became an example for the liberal caveat, supposedly according to Kant, that something "may be true in theory but not in practice." Marxist politics had historically succumbed to the theory-practice problem, but that does not mean that Marxists had been unaware of this problem, nor that Marxist theory had not developed a self-understanding of what it means to inhabit and work through this problem.

As Adorno put it in his 1966 book *Negative Dialectics*,

> The liquidation of theory by dogmatization and thought taboos contributed to the bad practice. . . . The interrelation of both moments [of theory and practice] is not settled once and for all but fluctuates historically. . . . Those who chide theory [for being] anachronistic obey the *topos* of dismissing, as obsolete, what remains painful [because it was] thwarted. . . . The fact that history has rolled over certain positions will be respected as a verdict on their truth content only by those who agree with Schiller that "world history is the world tribunal." What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations.[11]

What this meant for Adorno is that past emancipatory politics could not be superseded or rendered irrelevant the degree to which they remained unfulfilled. A task could be forgotten but it would continue to task the present. This means an inevitable return to it. The most broad-gauged question raised by this approach is the degree to which we may still live under capital in the way Marx understood it. If Marx's work is still able to provoke critical recognition of our present realities, then we are tasked to grasp the ways it continues to do so. This is not merely a

[11] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1966), trans. E. B. Ashton (Continuum: New York, 1983), 143–144.

matter of theoretical "analysis," however, but also raises issues of practical politics. This means inquiring into the ways Marx understood the relation of theory and practice, most especially his own. Adorno thought that this was not a matter of simply emulating Marx's political practice or theoretical perspectives, but rather trying to grasp the relation of theory and practice under changed conditions.

This articulated non-identity, antagonism and even contradiction of theory and practice, observable in the history of Marxism most of all, was not taken to be defeating for Adorno, but was in fact precisely where Marxism pointed acutely to the problem of freedom in capital, and how it might be possible to transform and transcend it. Adorno put it this way, in a late, posthumously published essay from 1969, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," inspired by his conflicts with both student activists and his old friend and colleague Herbert Marcuse, who he thought had regressed to a Romantic rejection of capital:

> If, to make an exception for once, one risks what is called a grand perspective, beyond the historical differences in which the concepts of theory and praxis have their life, one discovers the infinitely progressive aspect of the separation of theory and praxis, which was deplored by the Romantics and denounced by the Socialists in their wake — except for the mature Marx.[12]

As Adorno put it in a [May 5, 1969] letter to Marcuse,

> [T]here are moments in which theory is pushed on further by practice. But such a situation neither exists objectively today, nor does the barren and brutal practicism that confronts us here have the slightest thing to do with theory

[12] Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" (1969), in *Critical Models*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 266.

> anyhow. [Adorno and Marcuse, "Correspondence on the German Student Movement," trans. Esther Leslie, *New Left Review* I/233, Jan.–Feb. 1999, 127.]

In his final published essay, "Resignation" (1969), which became a kind of testament, Adorno pointed out that,

> Even political undertakings can sink into pseudo-activities, into theater. It is no coincidence that the ideals of immediate action, even the propaganda of the [deed], have been resurrected after the willing integration of formerly progressive organizations that now in all countries of the earth are developing the characteristic traits of what they once opposed. Yet this does not invalidate the [Marxist] critique of anarchism. Its return is that of a ghost. The impatience with [Marxian] theory that manifests itself with its return does not advance thought beyond itself. By forgetting thought, the impatience falls back below it.[13]

This is almost a direct paraphrase of Lenin, who wrote in his 1920 pamphlet *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder* that,

> [D]riven to frenzy by the horrors of capitalism . . . anarchism is characteristic of all capitalist countries. The instability of such revolutionism, its barrenness, and its tendency to turn rapidly into submission, apathy, phantasms, and even a frenzied infatuation with one bourgeois fad or another — all this is common knowledge. . . .
>
> Anarchism was not infrequently a kind of penalty for the opportunist sins of the working-class movement. The two monstrosities complemented each other.[14]

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[13] Adorno, "Resignation," (1969), in *Critical Models*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 292.
[14] Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Lenin Anthology* (New York: Norton, 1975), 559–560.

Adorno paralleled Lenin's discussion of the "phantasms" of non-Marxian socialism, and defense of a Marxist approach, stating that, "Thought, enlightenment conscious of itself, threatens to disenchant the pseudo-reality within which actionism moves." Immediately prior to Adorno's comment on anarchism, he discussed the antinomy of spontaneity and organization, as follows,

> Pseudo-activity is generally the attempt to rescue enclaves of immediacy in the midst of a thoroughly mediated and rigidified society. Such attempts are rationalized by saying that the small change is one step in the long path toward the transformation of the whole. The disastrous model of pseudo-activity is the "*do-it-yourself.*" . . . The do-it-yourself approach in politics is not completely of the same caliber [as the quasi-rational purpose of inspiring in the unfree individuals, paralyzed in their spontaneity, the assurance that everything depends on them]. The society that impenetrably confronts people is nonetheless these very people. The trust in the limited action of small groups recalls the spontaneity that withers beneath the encrusted totality and without which this totality cannot become something different. The administered world has the tendency to strangle all spontaneity, or at least to channel it into pseudo-activities. At least this does not function as smoothly as the agents of the administered world would hope. However, spontaneity should not be absolutized, just as little as it should be split off from the objective situation or idolized the way the administered world itself is.[15]

Adorno's poignant defense of Marxism was expressed most pithily in the final lines with which his "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" concludes, that,

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[15] Adorno, "Resignation," *Critical Models*, 291–292.

> Marx by no means surrendered himself to praxis. Praxis is a source of power for theory but cannot be prescribed by it. It appears in theory merely, and indeed necessarily, as a blind spot, as an obsession with what it being criticized. . . . This admixture of delusion, however, warns of the excesses in which it incessantly grows.[16]

Marxism is both true and untrue; the question is how one recognizes its truth and untruth, and the necessity — the inevitability — of its being both.

Adorno acknowledged his indebtedness to the best of historical Marxism when he wrote that,

> The theorist who intervenes in practical controversies nowadays discovers on a regular basis and to his shame that whatever ideas he might contribute were expressed long ago — and usually better the first time around.[17]

The politics of Critical Theory

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 the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists is itself what requires explanation, why they engaged in self-censorship and 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

[16] Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," *Critical Models*, 278.
[17] Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and the Law Today" (1963), in *Critical Models*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 71.

we say these things?"[18] It was not simply due to American exile in the Nazi era or post-WWII 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 the leaders of the Frankfurt Institute, Horkheimer and Adorno, in 1956, at the height of the Cold War and after Khrushchev's public admission of the crimes of the Stalin era, 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 *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 re-writing 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 into the later, post-WWII period of the Institute's work. In the series of conversations between Horkheimer and Adorno recorded by Adorno's wife Gretel from March to April 1956, Adorno expressed his interest in re-writing the *Communist Manifesto* along what he called "strictly Leninist" lines. Horkheimer did not object, but only pointed out that such a

18. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto?," trans. Rodney Livingstone, *New Left Review* 65 (September–October 2010), 46.

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."[19] Nonetheless, Horkheimer felt it was necessary to show "why one can be a communist and yet despise the Russians."[20] As Horkheimer put it, simply, "Theory is, as it were, one of humanity's tools."[21] Thus, they tasked themselves to try to continue Marxism, if only as "theory."

However, it is precisely the supposed turning away from political practice and retreat into theory that many commentators have characterized as the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists' 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 2nd International in the late 19th century (the so-called "Revisionist Dispute") and developed and culminated in the collapse of the 2nd Intl. and the division in Marxism in WWI 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

19. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto?," trans. Rodney Livingstone, *New Left Review* 65 (September–October 2010), 57.
20. "Towards a New Manifesto?," 57.
21. "Towards a New Manifesto?," 57.

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 put it in the conversation with Horkheimer in 1956, "I have always wanted to . . . develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin." 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 Frankfurt School Critical Theorists 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's historical perspective. 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 the [Frankfurt Institute's] journal takes."[22]

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 to Benjamin,

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22. Adorno to Horkheimer, March 21, 1936, quoted in Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 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" (Adorno to Horkheimer, June 2, 1941, quoted in Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 268).

> 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 [in the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"] 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*.

Adorno likely had in mind as well Lenin's *What is to be Done?* or, even especially, his post-revolutionary pamphlet *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. In the former, Lenin (in)famously distinguished between "trade union" and "socialist consciousness." But in the later 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.[23] 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.[24]

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,

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23. Lenin wrote, in *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (1920), that,

> Let us take, say, journalistic work. Newspapers, pamphlets and leaflets perform the indispensable work of propaganda, agitation and organisation. No mass movement in any country at all civilised can get along without a journalistic apparatus. No outcries against "leaders" or solemn vows to keep the masses uncontaminated by the influence of leaders will relieve us of the necessity of using, for this work, people from a bourgeois-intellectual environment or will rid us of the bourgeois-democratic, "private property" atmosphere and environment in which this work is carried out under capitalism. Even two and a half years after the overthrow of the bourgeoisie [in Russia], after the conquest of political power by the proletariat, we still have this atmosphere around us, this environment of mass (. . . artisan) bourgeois-democratic private property relations. . . . 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.

24. Adorno and Horkheimer, "Towards a New Manifesto?," 54.

> 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*.[25]

But 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 WWII, 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 such a position 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. . . .

25. Note 60.

> [Thesis 33:] The political task then would consist in reconstructing revolutionary theory. . . .[26]

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

> During the Revolution [beginning in 1917], 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.[27]

Adorno's commentary in conversation with Horkheimer in 1956, in a passage 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 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 milieu theory. Lenin was the first person to assert this.[28]

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26. Herbert Marcuse, "33 Theses," in *Technology, War, and Fascism*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1998), 217, 226–227.
27. Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 149.
28. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis" (1956), in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* (*GAS*) Vol. 19 (*Nachträge, Verzeichnisse und Register*) (S. Fischer, 1996), 71; quoted in Detlev Claussen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 233.

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," one of his aphoristic writings from 1926–31, published under the title *Dämmerung* (meaning "Twilight," either "Dusk" or "Dawn"),

> 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 business man 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.[29]

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-WWI revolutionary aftermath. This involved a deepening of the crisis of humanity, as 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.

From 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.

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

> 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 [of 1789], he is said to have changed the direction of his customary stroll from then on.[30]

Despite what occurred in the unfolding of developments in 20th century history, Adorno never reversed course.

Lenin in Horkheimer and Adorno's conversation on Communism in 1956

Horkheimer and Adorno's conversation in 1956, published in English translation as *Towards a New Manifesto* (2011), 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 noted the potential of the Communist Parties in France and Italy,[31] paralleling Marcuse's estimation in his 1947 "33 Theses:"

> 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 the praxis appropriate to it. The task seems impossible today. But perhaps the

30. Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline*, 72–73.

31 "[Horkheimer:] [S]uch a [revised, 'strictly Leninist' communist] manifesto could not appear in Russia, while in the United States and Germany it would be worthless. At best, it might have some success in France and Italy" (*NLR* 2010, 57); and, "[Adorno:] Any appeal to form a left-wing socialist party is not on the agenda. Such a party would either be dragged along in the wake of the Communist Party, or it would suffer the fate of the SPD or [U.K.] Labour Party" (*NLR* 2010, 61).

> relative independence from Soviet dictates, which this task demands, is present as a possibility in Western Europe's . . . communist parties.

Horkheimer and Adorno's conversation in 1956 was part of a greater crisis of Communism (uprising in Hungary, emergence of the post-colonial Non-Aligned Movement, split between the USSR and Communist China) that gave rise to the New Left. This was the time of the founding of *New Left Review*, to which C. Wright Mills wrote his famous "Letter to the New Left" (1960), calling for greater attention to the role of intellectuals in social-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?" (103). 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.[32] Marx called "capital" the domination of society by an alienated historical dynamic of value-production (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* (1923), how the fate of the workers becomes that of society as a whole. This went back to Marx and Engels in the 1840s: Engels had written a precursor to the *Communist Manifesto*, a "Credo" (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

[32] For instance, Lukács pointed out, in "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" part 1, "The Phenomenon of Reification," quoting Marx in volume III of *Capital*, that, "the conditions of direct exploitation [of the labourer], and those of realising surplus-value, are not identical. They diverge not only in place and time, but also logically."

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

At issue is the "bourgeois ideology" of the "fetish character of the commodity," or, how the working class misrecognized the reasons for its condition, blaming this on exploitation by the capitalists rather than the historical undermining of the social value of labor. As Marx explained in *Capital*, the workers exchanged, not the products of their work as with the labor of artisans, 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 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 it in "The Authoritarian State" (1940), the Industrial Revolution 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. See Adorno's 1942 essay "Reflections on Class Theory" and his 1968 speech "Late Capitalism or

Industrial Society?," which he published in the U.S. under the title "Is Marx Obsolete?" In "Reflections on Class Theory," Adorno pointed out that Marx and Engels's 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 *unfreedom*; and that only the complete dehumanization of labor was potentially its opposite, the liberation from work. "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" pointed out that the workers were not paid a share of the economic value of their labor, which Marx had recognized in post-Industrial Revolution capitalism was infinitesimal, but rather their wages were a cut of the profits of *capital*, granted to them for political reasons, to prevent revolution. The ramifications of this process were those addressed by the split in the socialist workers' movement — in 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" (in *Dämmerung*, 1926–31) Horkheimer explained how the "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." This followed Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, which prominently quoted Marx and Engels from *The Holy Family* (1845):

> 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.

And the necessary corrective was not the feeling of this oppression, but 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!" 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 (in Russia, Germany, Hungary and Italy). Reformist Social Democracy had succumbed to the "reification" of bourgeois ideology in seeking to preserve the workers' interests, and had become the counterrevolutionary bulwark of continued capitalism in the post-WWI world. There was a civil war in Marxism. The question was the revolutionary necessity and possibility of Communism that Lenin expressed in the October 1917 Revolution that 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, now become barbarized bourgeois ideology, the affirmation of work, rather than its dialectical *Aufhebung* (negation and transcendence through fulfillment and completion).

To put it in Lenin's terms, from *What is to be Done?* (1902), 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 celebrated 1843 letter to Ruge, "Communism is a dogmatic abstraction . . . infected by its opposite, private property." And, in his 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx stated unequivocally that,

> Communism is the position as 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, the form of human society.

For Marx, communism demanded an "immanent critique" according to its "dialectical" contradictions, heightened to adequate historical self-awareness.

The issue is the potential 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 Horkheimer and Adorno'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" (orphaned from *Minima Moralia* 1944–47 — the same time as the writing of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), 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."

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 as culpable, instead of recognizing the unfolding of history they described that had made Marxism potentially irrelevant, a "message in a bottle" they hoped could still yet be received.