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Do We Need Adorno?

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Marxism became a “message in a bottle” — can we yet receive it?

Horkheimer and Adorno’s 1956 conversation took place in the aftermath of the Khrushchev speech denouncing Stalin. This event signaled a possible political opening, not in the Soviet Union so much as for the international Left. Horkheimer and Adorno recognized the potential of the Communist Parties in France and Italy, 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 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 *Towards a New Manifesto* 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. Verso’s title was not misleading: 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. Marx called “capital” the domination of society by an alienated historical dynamic of value-production (M–C–M’ [Money-Commodity-Money]). 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 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. It is unfortunate if their conversation isn’t.

About the Authors

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